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Linking the Prevention of Problem Behaviors and Positive Youth Development: Core Competencies for Positive Youth Development and Risk Prevention

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Abstract

In this chapter, we present a brief review of the developmental literature linking healthy adjustment to five core competencies: (1) positive sense of self, (2) self-control, (3) decision-making skills, (4) a moral system of belief, and (5) prosocial connectedness. A central premise of this chapter and the rest of the volume is that promoting mastery of social and emotional core competencies provides a connection between positive youth development and risk prevention programming. In subsequent chapters, empirical evidence linking these core competencies with prevention of specific risk behaviors is reviewed, and examples of integrated promotion and prevention efforts in the United States and internationally are discussed. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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Adolescence generally is considered a time of experimentation and increased involvement in what have been called *risk behaviors* or *problem behaviors*, including school failure and early school leaving, youth violence, substance use, and high-risk sexual behavior (Biglan, Brennan, Foster, & Holder, 2004). Although most youth navigate this developmental stage relatively unscathed, risk behaviors for some youth become chronic, increasing the likelihood of adversity in multiple domains: physical health, life expectancy, psychosocial adjustment, and successful transition to adulthood (Jessor, 1992; Lindberg, Boggess, & Williams, 2000). School failure and early school leaving can lead to underemployment, violence can lead to criminal behavior, substance use can lead to addiction and related health problems, and risky sexual behavior can lead to sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies.

Youth who are most likely to become regularly involved in one or more of these risk behaviors have been labeled *at-risk youth* or *youth at risk*. This increased chance of involvement can stem from individual characteristics of youth, the contexts they live in, the situations they encounter, and how these factors interact over time. A focus on at-risk youth has led to a proliferation of research highlighting the importance of discrete risk factors that increase the probability of risk behavior. In addition, research and practice have emphasized the role of protective factors that function to mitigate risk and can be considered promotive factors when they portend adjustment absent risk (Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Wei, Farrington, & Wikström, 2002). Successful adaptation in the face of extreme stress has been labeled *resilience* (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Drawing on research that has identified specific predictors and trajectories of risk, a multitude of small- and large-scale preventive interventions for specific risk behaviors have been developed, implemented, and evaluated (Biglan et al., 2004). Building on these efforts, practitioners and policy-makers also have stressed the urgent need for coherent strategies and evidence-based programs that can be incorporated into large-scale federal initiatives in the United States (Ripple & Zigler, 2003). Concerns about youth at risk are international in scope (World Bank, 2006).

Carefully articulated and empirically supported models of youth risk behaviors have contributed significantly to the field of child and adolescent development over the past several decades. However, as these models began to shape community programs and policies for youth, conceptual and practical challenges emerged. From a pragmatic perspective, one of the principal challenges of a risk-focused approach is that it resulted in the proliferation of separate problem-specific programs, funded by independent agencies supporting work in each risk area, and disseminated through different publication venues (for example, substance abuse prevention programs funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse with findings published in drug and alcohol specialty journals). Rather than emphasizing the identification of shared risk, protective, and promotive factors, both

research and practice generally have treated adolescent risk behaviors as separate and independent, with little consideration of their interconnectedness and common causal pathways. This is somewhat surprising given high levels of covariation across risk behaviors in the United States (Barone et al., 1995) and internationally (Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey, 1994), and empirically supported theoretical models such as problem behavior theory that provide a coherent framework for understanding the common predictors of multiple risk or problem behaviors (Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Jessor et al., 2003).

A second challenge relates more generally to the vision of youth that emerged from a risk-focused approach. In recent years, a programmatic emphasis on youth at risk has been criticized for emphasizing what goes wrong rather than what goes right; this perspective portrays youth as problems to be fixed and development as a process of overcoming deficits and risk. As proponents of strength-based models have noted, a risk-focused approach can obscure the fact that adolescence also is a time of mastery linked to each child's unique talents, strengths, skills, and interests (Damon, 2004; Larson, 2000; Scales & Leffert, 2004). An emphasis on the positive and adaptive features of adolescence has been incorporated into a number of models generally subsumed under the rubric of *positive youth development*. From this perspective, successful development is viewed not as the absence of risk behavior but as the presence of positive attributes that enable youth to reach their full potential as productive and engaged adults (Lerner & Benson, 2003; Pittman & Irby, 1996).

Positive youth development models typically encompass a broad set of personal and contextual attributes for all youth, without identifying youth most in need or specifying whether and how specific youth strengths can mitigate risk. A number of these models have been articulated, each with specific implications for practice. One of the most widely used approaches is the developmental assets model promoted by the Search Institute (Benson, 1997). This model is built around forty developmental assets that reflect internal qualities such as positive values and external assets such as caring families and high community expectations for youth behavior (Scales & Leffert, 2004). A more focused effort within the developmental literature highlights the Five Cs youth need to thrive: cognitive and behavioral competence, confidence, positive social connections, character, and caring, leading to a sixth C of contribution to society (Lerner & Benson, 2003). Still other models focus primarily on engagement as a key marker of positive youth development, emphasizing the need to foster initiative (Larson, 2000) and involve youth as active contributors to their communities (Hughes & Curnan, 2000).

To some degree, risk prevention and positive youth development approaches have been portrayed as opposite and somewhat incompatible ends of a continuum (Small & Memmo, 2004). From a translational perspective, not only have risk-focused models emphasizing discrete behaviors led to separate interventions for separate problems, but a more general

debate between problem-centered versus asset-building strategies often has forced schools and communities to choose between these two perspectives. Yet an either-or approach does little to address the reality of daily life: communities that want to embrace the talents and strengths of all youth also must address the very real problems of some youth that interfere with their own development as well as the lives of others. At this juncture, rather than pitting these approaches against each other, it is more useful (and cost-effective) for the field to emphasize their commonalities and specify how they can be integrated in order to meet the needs of all youth, including those at greatest risk. Building assets should not blind us to the importance of reducing adversity for youth most likely to experience negative outcomes. Even the most ardent proponents of youth development and asset building acknowledge the need to accentuate the positive in order to simultaneously minimize the negative (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999; Lerner & Benson, 2003).

Linking the promotion of positive development with the prevention of risk is conceptually appealing. As Masten and Coatsworth (1998, p. 216) comment, "Prevention at its best represents both an effort to foster competence and to prevent problems." Despite repeated calls over the years for integrated approaches (Cowen, 1973; Hawkins & Weis, 1985), efforts to develop comprehensive models to guide research and practice have been the exception. Still, considerable gains have been made in fostering a structured dialogue between prevention and promotion. For example, in the mid-1990s, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services commissioned a large-scale report focused on positive youth development and its links to prevention of youth problem behaviors, *Positive Youth Development in the United States* (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1999). The report noted that twenty-four well-evaluated youth development programs resulted in significant reductions in a range of problem behaviors. However, definitions of positive youth development were linked to fifteen attributes of programs (such as promoting bonding or providing recognition for positive behavior) rather than characteristics of well-adjusted youth. Notably, the report did not specify the precise markers of adjustment for youth and how these attributes are linked specifically to risk behaviors.

This volume continues the dialogue by presenting a set of chapters written by accomplished developmental and prevention researchers with expertise in one or more youth risk behaviors. The overarching goal is to articulate a set of core social and emotional competencies that capture what it means to be a healthy youth (in other words, individual attributes that define positive outcomes) and to examine how these competencies are linked to specific risk behaviors and related preventive interventions and positive youth development programs in the United States and internationally.

Individual markers of adjustment are emphasized as outcomes, with careful consideration of how these competencies unfold over time as a result of the complex interactions across multiple levels of the social ecological

system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Advances in prevention science and practice have underscored the need to consider how skills and competencies develop across multiple and intersecting developmental contexts, including families, peers, and communities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Guerra & Leidy, 2008).

Furthermore, these skills and competencies may have distinctive meanings within specific ethnic and cultural groups (Guerra & Smith, 2005). Consider a skill such as decision making. Although certain elements of decision-making skills, such as attention to relevant cues and generation of multiple alternative solutions, may be important cognitive-developmental milestones that are relevant across cultures, culturally appropriate decision making ultimately requires integration with relevant group values and practices. For example, in collectivistic societies such as Japan, interpersonal harmony and the avoidance of conflict are primary values against which the adaptive value of any decision will be judged (Markus & Kitayama, 1998). Similarly, within Latino culture, the value of *colectivismo* emphasizes the importance of subordinating personal desires to the interests of the group (Mirabel-Colon & Velez, 2005).

Skill-building interventions that go beyond direct instruction and address ecological influences that are important for development are more likely to have a preventive effect and promote positive adjustment (Metropolitan Area Child Study, 2002). Still, a central premise of this volume is that it is critical to articulate the precise individual competencies that are the ultimate targets of preventive interventions across the ecological spectrum and to examine the connections between promotion and prevention efforts.

Five Core Competencies

How do we know what set of core competencies best characterize a psychologically well-adjusted youth and can provide a foundation for preventive interventions to reduce risk behaviors? First, it is important to clarify the meaning of *competence* in relation to adolescent social and emotional adjustment. Construed broadly, competence reflects effective adaptation in a given environment. From a developmental standpoint, competence can be understood as mastery of key developmental tasks that signal effective adaptation within a particular life stage and as determined by a specific historical and cultural context (Havighurst, 1972). Over the years, multiple lists of major developmental tasks have been proposed (for a brief review, see Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Across most lists, these tasks reflect broad domains of competence linked to specific age-appropriate behaviors (such as the ability to follow rules and get along with others when children enter school), as well as a range of skills and accomplishments. To date, there has not been a universally agreed-on list of key markers of adolescent development and adjustment, although certain competencies have received considerable attention in developmental and prevention research.

Based on a careful review of the literature and consensus among the authors of the chapters in this volume and a group of invited discussants at an all-day workshop, five core competencies were selected to provide a guiding framework for the chapters in this volume: (1) a positive sense of self, (2) self-control, (3) decision-making skills, (4) a moral system of belief, and (5) prosocial connectedness. Although these competencies clearly are interconnected (for instance, higher levels of self-control lead to better decision making), each has received substantial attention in its own right. They also are closely aligned with proposed assets and strengths from many of the youth development frameworks discussed previously. In addition, although there are other candidates for potential inclusion, these competencies capture important elements of evidence-based competence enhancement and prevention programs, for example, life skills training (Botvin, Mihalic, & Grotzinger, 1998) and aggression replacement training (Goldstein, 2004).

A central premise of this volume is that high levels of these competencies provide a marker for positive youth development, and low levels of these competencies increase the likelihood of adolescent risk behavior. To provide a background and context for connecting competencies with risk behavior and prevention, it is useful to define each competency and identify more specific empirical indicators, which are supported by the literature on healthy development and risk prevention. It is important to keep in mind that each of these competencies can be divided into subdimensions. Indeed, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, empirical studies linking risk behavior and a particular competency may be limited to a particular subdimension. We lay out the multiple and most salient components of each competency in relation to its potential for helping us understand adjustment and risk but acknowledge that coverage of each specific subdimension may be uneven.

A Positive Sense of Self. The self has long been an object of discourse and inquiry in the social sciences. Currently there is considerable agreement regarding the importance of the self in behavior and adjustment, although less clarity regarding which components of the self are most important, how the self is shaped through social interaction, and the functions that the self performs (for a contemporary and historical review of research on the self, see Harter, 2006). There are also many possible interpretations of what it means to have a “positive sense of self” in relation to adaptation and adjustment in adolescence. For the goals of this volume, we highlight three components of self that emerge early in development and exert considerable influence during adolescence and the transition to adulthood: self-awareness, agency, and self-esteem.

Self-awareness becomes evident by the second year of life, although some of the earliest forms of self-awareness have been noted soon after birth (Gibson, 1995). With developmental progress comes an increasingly differentiated and more complex self. Young children typically rely on concrete, observable features to describe themselves, incorporating psychological attributes as they get older. With the emergence of language, children begin

to construct more enduring portraits of the self, developing a personal narrative or autobiographical memory that provides consistency to experiences of the self (Moore & Lemmon, 2001).

During adolescence, self-descriptions vary across different roles with different demands (for example, the demands of peers versus the demands of parents), leading to conflicting self-stories and a search for a coherent identity. Indeed, the resolution of this identity search, or “crisis,” has long been considered a normative feature and primary developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Self-awareness for youth encompasses not only an accurate assessment of their physical, psychological, and behavioral attributes but a more refined and integrated conceptualization of the self that lays the groundwork for one’s future life course. “Who I am” sets the stage for the “Who I could become”—providing hopefulness, direction, and a sense of purpose. The construction of future possible selves as personalized representations of important life goals (what individuals could become, would like to become, or are afraid of becoming) gives further meaning to experience and motivates action (Cross & Markus, 1991). A positive sense of self during adolescence hinges on success in constructing and maintaining positive and realistic possible selves to motivate current and future behavior (just as negative possible selves can portend maladjustment).

Agency, a sense of volition over self-generated acts, provides the motor for action. As early as infancy, individuals derive great pleasure from the recognition that they can control certain environmental events, such as throwing a ball on the floor or moving parts of a toy, and they respond negatively when these contingencies are interrupted (Watson, 1985). An important component of self-development is the increasing realization over time that the self is an active, independent agent, just as others are active, independent agents in their own lives. This forms the basis for a sense of self-efficacy, defined as people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over relevant events in their lives. A positive and strong sense of self-efficacy enhances adjustment and well-being as individuals set challenging goals, sustain efforts, and recover in the face of failure (Bandura, 1994). Absent self-efficacy for positive events (such as belief in one’s ability to get good grades in school), individuals may build self-confidence by developing beliefs in their capabilities for negative events (such as the ability to bully others and act aggressively).

Self-esteem is both a widely cited and controversial marker of positive adjustment (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). At first blush, it is difficult even to define self-esteem. It has been used to refer to global judgments of self-worth that emerge around middle childhood, as well as domain-specific evaluations of different aspects of the self that become increasingly differentiated from childhood through adolescence and adulthood (Harter, 1990). Both global and domain-specific self-esteem may also be considered traits that are relatively stable over time or states that fluctuate in response to immediate conditions. In recent years, there has been a

shift to hierarchical models that incorporate both global and domain-specific self-esteem. Individuals judge themselves across multiple domains, with global self-esteem reflecting a general self-evaluation that provides a type of composite assessment across these domains.

People also differ in the relative salience of domain-specific evaluations for their overall or global self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). For instance, some adolescents may consider academic performance important to their self-worth. In contrast, other teenagers may disengage self-esteem from their performance at school, focusing more on athletic abilities, popularity with peers, or more problematic talents such as power and superiority over others. Individuals also are more likely to gravitate to settings that provide opportunities to enhance self-esteem in relevant domains. Academically oriented students are likely to seek out educational opportunities, whereas youth whose self-esteem is contingent on power and aggression are more likely to seek out juvenile gangs.

High self-esteem is an important developmental goal associated with multiple indexes of positive affect and life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). However, understanding the links with positive and negative behaviors may require a more detailed understanding of how self-esteem is defined, what it is based on, and how it is realized. In other words, healthy adjustment should be related not only to the overall level of self-esteem but to the specific domains on which it is contingent and related opportunities for engagement and success in these domains. Just as socially valued contingencies contribute to positive development, the wrong contingencies (or lack of opportunities to satisfy even positive contingencies in socially acceptable ways) can contribute to one or more risk behaviors.

Self-Control. From an early age, children become increasingly adept at self-control, defined broadly as the ability to regulate and manage affect and behavior in a controlled versus automatic fashion in accordance with situational or normative demands. Self-control is evident when children follow rules they might rather disobey; inhibit their desire for immediate gratification, particularly in the presence of a tempting reward; and modulate responses in accordance with age-graded standards. A further distinction has been made between emotion regulation of internal feeling states and behavioral regulation of actions as two distinct components of self-control (Thompson, 1994).

Significant advances in self-control emerge during the preschool years in tandem with advances in general cognitive abilities, the control of attention, and emergent selfhood (Kopp, 1982). Early in development, children still control their behavior primarily in response to environmental contingencies such as punishment and reinforcement. They resist the temptation to take a coveted toy when an adult is present, but frequently grab the same toy as soon as the adult leaves the room. Over time, children internalize standards, which requires less external monitoring and more internal management (Bandura, 1991). However, brain maturation linked to self-control

continues to develop through the adolescent years, as demonstrated in recent studies of brain activity showing that frontal lobe activation, an important determinant of behavioral inhibition, increases between adolescence and adulthood (Giedd et al., 1999; Steinberg, 2008). In addition to developmental progressions in self-control skills, there are individual temperamental, neurobiological, and caregiving contributions to the development of individual differences in self-control (Thompson, 2006).

Self-control is critical for individual adaptation as well as the structure and function of various sociocultural groups; organized groups and social institutions persist in part because of shared compliance to a set of standards. At the individual level, self-control is a prerequisite for goal-oriented behavior across multiple domains. An adolescent who wants to lose weight must exert self-control to inhibit a competing desire to eat chocolate cake. A student who wants to get a good grade on a test must inhibit a competing desire to stay out late with friends. Sustained relationships often require learning how to regulate negative emotions such as anger in a constructive fashion. Some evidence suggests that self-control may actually be a limited resource that can become depleted if used too often (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

From a developmental perspective, interest in self-control initially emerged from the study of dysregulation. In other words, why do some children resist parental requests or seem to be unable to wait their turn? Much of this work focused on the origins of self-regulation in young children and associated problems, with less attention focused on self-control during adolescence and its relation to adjustment. Most of the work on self-control during childhood and adolescence has emphasized the relation of low self-control to risk behaviors such as aggression (Caspi, Henry, McGee, Moffitt, & Silva, 1995) and criminality (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) rather than its role in adaptation. More recently, Lerner and colleagues have examined the relation between self-control and both positive developmental outcomes and risk behaviors, providing empirical evidence that adolescent self-control, as measured by goal setting and goal pursuit, is positively related to indicators of both adjustment and risk (Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2007).

Decision-Making Skills. The transition from childhood to adolescence is characterized by increasing autonomy and opportunities for choices independent of adults. Many of the daily and long-term decisions youth make during adolescence affect their current and future well-being, including their social relationships, academic performance, and future opportunities. The capacity to make effective decisions also increases during this time with the development of more sophisticated abstract reasoning skills and a growing capacity for probabilistic reasoning. By adolescence, individuals are capable of imagining future outcomes in the present, coordinating independent pieces of information, and understanding the likelihood of various consequences occurring. Still, compared to adults, children and adolescents are less adept at several components of decision making: they are less able to

plan for or anticipate the future, generate consequences spontaneously, learn from negative consequences, or view negative consequences as harmful (Reyna & Farley, 2006).

There have been several approaches to studying decision making during childhood and adolescence. Different decision-making frameworks have been used to study relations with different types of behavior. For instance, decision theory, emphasizing discrete steps such as listing choices, identifying consequences, and evaluating these consequences, has been used to study different types of adolescent risk behavior (Beyth-Marom, Austin, Fischhoff, Palmgren, & Jacobs-Quadrel, 1993). Studies have focused on characteristics of adolescent decision making linked to risk such as accuracy of risk perceptions and perceived vulnerability. In general, when compared with adults, adolescents overestimate risk and are just as likely to feel vulnerable. The most notable difference is that perceived benefits, as opposed to risks, are more likely to drive decisions. Furthermore, rather than carefully mulling over risks and benefits, better decision makers tend to rely on “gist-based” thinking in which they categorically avoid dangerous risks (Reyna & Farley, 2006).

A variation on decision theory emphasizes multiple components of mature decision making as related to responsible and irresponsible behaviors. Rather than focus on discrete decision-making processes, research on maturity of judgment emphasizes multiple components of effective decision making linked to individual qualities, including responsibility (self-reliance and autonomy), perspective (concern about consequences and impact on others), and temperance (self-control). In general, maturity of judgment has been found to increase with age and correlate with and predict more responsible decisions (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996).

Social information processing is another decision-making framework based on sequential processing of information related to social situations. Although social information-processing models have been applied to risk behaviors such as aggression and violence, they are essentially models of social competence and have been used extensively in developmental research. They have been applied to ongoing decisions involved in social interactions, with studies examining how steps of social information processing affect adjustment. One of the most comprehensive and widely cited models was proposed by Dodge and colleagues (Crick & Dodge, 1994). This model builds on previous work examining goal setting, response generation, consequential thinking, and attributional biases and integrates other studies that have placed more emphasis on underlying rule structures and scripts children learn across multiple ecological settings (Guerra & Huesmann, 2004). To date, there is considerable empirical evidence suggesting that when faced with problematic social situations, well-adjusted children (those who are well behaved and well liked by peers) attend to an array of social cues and interpret those cues in an unbiased fashion, select appropriate goals, access and generate positive responses, consider consequences,

and enact prosocial behaviors. Furthermore, this cognitive and behavioral pattern becomes increasingly automatic over time (Huesmann, 1998).

A Moral System of Belief. Morality is constructed by the child over time through social experiences shaped by cognitive-developmental abilities that increase with age. Although the very nature of morality has been debated for centuries (What is morality? What is the moral course of action?), an essential component involves internalized beliefs about how people in a society should behave in relation to others. Moral cognition encompasses judgments about moral issues such as harm, fairness, integrity, and responsibility, and it engages psychological process such as perspective taking and empathy (Guerra, Nucci, & Huesmann, 1994).

Developmental evidence suggests that the capacity for moral behavior is present during infancy. Infants show distress and pleasure in response to signals from caregivers and soon learn to comfort others in distress (Hoffman, 2000). These emotional dispositions are universal, although there is some variability in degree. Socialization experiences during childhood and adolescence affect how these capacities are codified into a particular moral belief system reflecting family, community, and cultural values. There is also variability in the salience of these moral belief systems for an adolescent's developing identity. Just as self-esteem is dependent on particular contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), individuals also differ on the centrality of moral beliefs to their developing sense of self, labeled their *moral identity*. As Damon (2004) and others have noted, moral identity may be the cement that binds moral thinking to moral action. In other words, if young people endorse a moral course of action and believe that it is essential to their identity, they ought to act accordingly (Nisan, 1996).

An emphasis on the development of a moral system of belief accompanied by a strong sense of moral identity has been a cornerstone of many positive youth development models. The forty developmental assets promoted by the Search Institute (Benson, 1997) include qualities with clear moral components: responsibility, restraint, caring, social justice, integrity, and honesty. Similarly, character education programs such as Character Counts emphasize personal qualities such as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. To the extent that specific risk behaviors involve potential harm to others (clearly violence, although one can argue that all risk behaviors have the potential for harm to those in the adolescent's immediate social circle as well as to society), moral identity is an important competency for positive youth development.

Prosocial Connectedness. The concept of connectedness has been used widely in the positive youth development literature, although there has been relatively little theoretical and empirical consistency in how it is defined. Terms such as *investment*, *engagement*, *attachment*, *bonding*, *sense of belonging*, and *maturing* all have been used to describe youth affiliations across a range of socialization domains, including families, schools, and

communities. What these terms have in common is an overarching focus on a psychological state of belonging where individual youth perceive that they and others are cared for, acknowledged, trusted, and empowered within a given context (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Whitlock, 2006). This state of belonging works both ways: connectedness involves both feeling cared for and caring about the social environment. These perceptions should be unmistakably linked to specific qualities of social contexts, but they are still individual perceptions consistent with the core competencies framework. Even the most welcoming contexts may alienate some youth if the fit between individual personal and developmental needs is askew (Eccles & Midgely, 1993).

The developmental literature suggests that individuals are genetically prewired to develop social attachments, beginning with the early bond between infants and their caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). These early attachments lead to internal working models of social relationships that serve as preliminary rules to guide both behavior and feelings in social interactions (for instance, that others can be trusted). The effects of positive and secure attachments appear to be far reaching and long lasting, with attachment quality predicting adjustment differences across multiple contexts and at later periods. Specifically, more secure patterns of early attachment predict higher levels of competence across domains and well into adolescence (Jacobsen, Edelstein, & Hofman, 1994).

Although a significant amount of developmental research has emphasized early connections with caregivers and among family members, as children grow up, they are progressively exposed to a range of social groups and contexts that influence adjustment. Their lives are intertwined with multiple peer groups, including friends, romantic partners, siblings, neighborhood children, cliques, classmates, and, most recently, a virtual online social world. They are involved with adults other than parents and relatives as they navigate different institutions and settings, including youth groups, religious organizations, and schools (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002). Each of these social ecologies carries with it multiple opportunities for participation and connectedness, just as they can portend withdrawal and alienation.

As several recent reviews have noted, youth connectedness across these multiple domains is a primary determinant of adjustment (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003) and also predicts risk taking in certain areas, such as high-risk sexual behavior (Kirby, 2001). Because schools are a primary developmental context for most children in the United States and internationally, a growing body of research has emphasized the importance of school connectedness in positive youth development and how it changes across elementary, middle, and high school (McNeeley, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Although shifts in organizational structure of schools in the United States, particularly in middle school, have been designed in part to increase student belonging and connectedness, research suggests that

perceptions of school connectedness actually decrease in a linear fashion, with high school students reporting the lowest levels (WestEd, 2001).

Connectedness requires both opportunities and skills. Affluent settings typically are characterized by an abundance of opportunities for engagement, whereas resource-poor communities often struggle to provide meaningful connections for youth. Nevertheless, many opportunities for social engagement require a certain level of skill and motivation. Students who do well academically are more likely to be engaged in school life, athletic abilities are needed for most sports teams, musical aptitude is required for sustained involvement in band and orchestra, engagement with peers requires social skills, and so on. Furthermore, although skilled youth are more likely to be engaged and connected to social groups and institutions, youth with fewer skills and opportunities nevertheless find ways to belong. Virtual video game communities, Internet chatrooms, deviant peer groups, and youth gangs all provide at least some opportunity for connectedness. Belonging in and of itself, although psychologically rewarding, is unlikely to be associated with positive youth development and low levels of risk behaviors unless youth belong to prosocial groups.

Overview of the Volume

Taken together, the research suggests that these five competencies play an important role in the promotion of positive youth development and prevention of risk. The remaining chapters in this volume link these core competencies with the prevention of four broad types of risk behavior. Catherine Bradshaw, Lindsey O'Brennan, and Clea McNeely in Chapter Two examine the five competencies in relation to the prevention of school failure and early school leaving. They emphasize the critical role of prosocial connectedness to the school environment, other youth, and parents in promoting success at school. In Chapter Three, Terri Sullivan, Albert Farrell, Amie Bettencourt, and Sarah Helms consider the relation between the competencies and the prevention of youth violence. Their review underscores the utility of the social-cognitive perspective in understanding the role of the core competencies in youth violence. Tamara Haegerich and Patrick Tolan apply the core competencies framework to the prevention of adolescent substance use in Chapter Four. By adopting a developmental-ecological perspective, their work illustrates the importance of positive sense of self and self-control in reducing use of drugs and alcohol. In Chapter Five, Vignetta Charles and Robert Blum explore the association among the core competencies and the prevention of high-risk sexual behavior. Their work highlights the importance of effective decision making, a positive sense of self, and prosocial connectedness for promoting healthy romantic relationships in adolescence.

Each chapter summarizes the empirical literature linking the five core competencies to the risk behavior, provides examples from developmental

and prevention research, and identifies areas for future research on promotion of the core competencies. The authors highlight programs and policies that have changed one or more core competencies through efforts designed to build individual skills, strengthen relationships, and enhance opportunities and supports across multiple developmental contexts.

In Chapter Six, Sophie Naudeau, Wendy Cunningham, Mattias Lundberg, and Linda McGinnis provide a broader, international perspective on positive youth development and prevention of risk behaviors, with examples of comprehensive policies and programs around the world. They identify a set of practical recommendations for policymakers in promoting the core competencies. The volume concludes with a brief commentary on the core competencies framework and the chapters focused on the four risk behaviors. We discuss the strengths and limitations of this framework and identify areas for future research linking positive youth development and risk prevention.

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