How does a teenager’s neighborhood influence development?

A study by developmental psychologist Michael Criss finds that parents and friends can act as protective factors against the negative effects of a high-risk neighborhood.

Recent research has focused on protective factors that may boost resilience in certain individuals.

*Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*

Protective factors: A high-quality parent-child relationship and positive characteristics in friends
The participants lived in high-risk neighborhoods in the metropolitan Tulsa, Oklahoma area. Typical neighborhood occurrences included frequently heard gunshots, kids threatening to hurt others, high unemployment, and burglaries/thefts. Adolescents answered questions about any exposure to neighborhood violence, their own delinquent and aggressive behavior, and the characteristics of their friends (e.g. prosocial behavior, emotion regulation). Parents answered questions about neighborhood danger, their child's antisocial behavior, and their own prosocial behavior/emotion regulation. The authors also observed videotaped interactions between the parent and adolescent to measure the quality of their relationship. Low scores indicated an unhappy or weak relationship, while high scores reflected open and warm interactions.

Criss and his colleagues found that two main attributes served as protective factors that helped attenuate the link between neighborhood risk and adolescent antisocial behavior. First, having a high-quality relationship with one's parents had a positive effect. The second attribute was the presence of positive characteristics in one's friends like prosocial behavior and emotional regulation. However, a high quality peer-adolescent relationship or positive parent characteristics alone did not weaken the association between neighborhood risk and antisocial behavior. “These results show the importance of teaching parents how to establish and maintain positive relationships with their teens.”

“On one hand, these findings are important because they show that both parents and peers serve as buffers or protective factors among at-risk adolescents — that is, both are important,” said Criss. “On the other hand, different characteristics are important for each type of relationship. For the parent-teen dyad, what’s really important is having a supportive and warm relationship. However, with peer relationships, what’s really important is having positive older role models.” He believes the findings in this study and others which examine protective factors have strong intervention implications because they provide clear examples of possible areas that could alleviate the negative effects of neighborhood risk. For instance, these results show the importance of teaching parents – assuming they are present in the child’s life to begin with – how to establish and maintain positive relationships with their teens.

“In addition, these findings are consistent with the literature showing that multi-faceted interventions that utilize different people — for instance, both parents and friends — tend to be the most effective,” Criss said.