How does a teenager's neighborhood influence development?

by Meeri Kim
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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.

The presence of violence and danger in a child’s neighborhood has been linked to antisocial behavior during adolescence. Neighborhood danger — which refers to safety concerns such as abandoned houses, homeless persons, drugs, and gangs — can be associated with strong positive beliefs about aggression and high levels of aggressive behavior in youth. Also, children who grow up exposed to violent events like shootings, stabbings, or muggings are more likely to have conduct problems.

High-risk neighborhoods take their toll on child development through a number of different avenues. The stress of living in a dangerous and violent neighborhood can disrupt parenting, which in turn influences antisocial behavior in children. Parents can become overly hostile or disengaged. Also, most bad neighborhoods lack positive role models for youth.

"Unfortunately, when someone from risky neighborhoods is successful (e.g. graduates college), they often move away from the neighborhood. Thus, the remaining potential role models end up being aggressive and perhaps part of a gang," said Michael Criss, Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Science at Oklahoma State University. "In other words, neighborhood violence may lead to antisocial behavior through observational learning."

But not all teens from high-risk neighborhoods end up with developmental difficulties. Recent research has focused on protective factors that may boost resilience in certain individuals. For instance, do good friends help alleviate the negative impact of neighborhood violence for kids? Or does their relationship with parents matter more?

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Criss wanted to examine both parents and peers as protective factors given the importance of both during adolescence. In particular, a study by Criss and his colleagues, published by the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology in November 2017, analyzed how parent and peer relationships influence the link between neighborhood risk and antisocial behavior.

Protective factors: A high-quality parent-child relationship and positive characteristics in friends

Criss and his colleagues collected data from 206 families with adolescents in the age range of 10 to
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.

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“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.

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