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Who Is at Risk for Failure?

- ★ When you consider your school, who do you think is at risk for failure?
- ★ When you think about risk for failure, do you think about both academic and social behavior failure?
- ★ How important do you think teachers are for preventing or reducing risk for failure?

Many children in schools today are at risk for failure (Stormont, 2007; Stormont, Reinke, Herman, & Lembke, 2012). Students who are at risk for failure include students who have within-child and/or within-environmental circumstances that put them in a vulnerable position for having problems in school (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009; Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Stormont, 2007). These problems could be academic or social or both. Following are some specific statistics regarding risk factors:

- ★ Many children enter kindergarten at risk for failure due to limited skills, including academic and self-regulation skills (Stormont, Beckner, Mitchell, & Richter, 2005).
- ★ One in five children has social, emotional, and behavior problems (World Health Organization, 2004).
- ★ First-grade children with both academic and social behavior problems have the worst long-term outcomes compared with children with problems in one area only (Darney, Reinke, Herman, Stormont, & Ialongo, 2012; Reinke, Herman, Petras, & Ialongo, 2008).
- ★ If children with behavior problems maintain these problems into third grade, there is little chance they will ever not have behavior

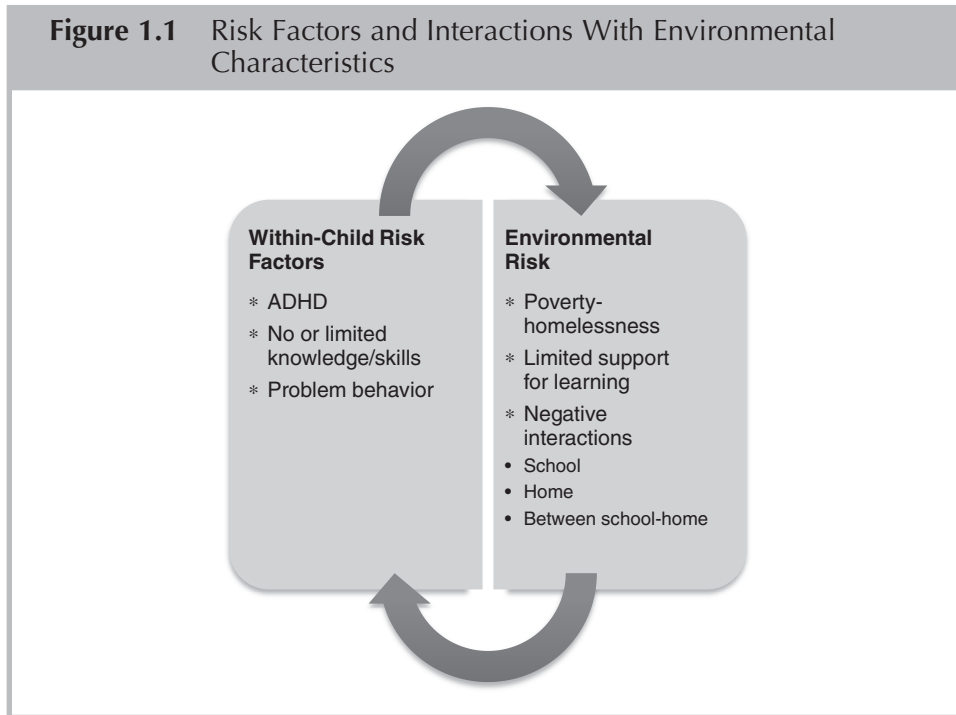
problems; they will need substantial supports to be successful in school and life (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004).

- ★ If children receive any mental health or social emotional interventions, they receive them in school (Hoagwood et al., 2007; Rones & Hoagwood, 2000).
- ★ Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) affects approximately 5% of school-age children; most children with ADHD spend the majority of the day in the general education classroom (Zentall, 2006).
- ★ Children with ADHD are at risk for a host of negative short-term and long-term outcomes, including social skill deficits, peer rejection, retention, low achievement, and dropping out (Stormont, 2001; Zentall, 2006).
- ★ Of individuals in this country, 15% meet the criteria for poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Families are at increased risk for poverty as their incomes have declined (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).
- ★ Individuals making minimum wage cannot afford a fair market apartment and often experience homelessness despite working full-time (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).
- ★ Approximately 37% of the homeless population includes families with small children (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011).
- ★ Up to 1.6 million children experience homelessness each year in the United States (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011). Children who are homeless are at great risk for academic and social problems in school (Davey, 2004; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011; Stormont & McCathren, in press).

RISK AND RESILIENCE

According to systems theory and ecological theory, children interact with individuals in their environments and use experiences to direct future interactions with specific individuals and in certain settings (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009; Pianta, 1999; Stormont, 2007). Elementary school is a very important time for working to increase opportunities to build success for children at risk for failure (Stormont, 2007). Interactions with individuals in different environments can increase or maintain risk for failure or can be a place for fostering resilience through targeting needs for support (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009; Stormont, 2007).

In this chapter, specific within-child and within-environment characteristics that according to research are associated with risk for failure will be presented. Although there are theoretical frameworks that emphasize the community and additional levels of influence on children's resiliency, the focus of this book is on what general educators can directly impact to improve children's likelihood of success. Common characteristics and



needs for support that children have will then be discussed. The framework used to conceptualize risk is the following from Stormont (2007):

1. Certain characteristics create risk for failure, including having negative social and academic outcomes.
2. Characteristics in children interact with characteristics in settings and increase or decrease risk for failure (see Figure 1.1).
3. Risk for failure does not mean failure is bound to occur.
4. Knowledge of risk characteristics should be used to inform needs for support.

CHILD CHARACTERISTICS

The children who are the focus of this book are those who do not have a disability but may be at risk for developing one without early intervention. The children targeted in this book are also those who are at great risk for falling through the cracks (Barkley, 2006; Espinosa, 2005; Zentall, 2006). The risk characteristics addressed in this book include the child characteristics of having ADHD, limited knowledge or skills related to academics and English, and behavior problems. Children with these risk factors

have characteristics that create vulnerability for failure, particularly without early attention to their needs (Belfiore, Auld, & Lee, 2005; Coyne, Kame'enui, & Carnine, 2011; Espinosa, 2005; Herman, Reinke, Stormont, Puri, & Agarwal, 2010; Stormont, 2007; Walker et al., 2004; Zentall, 2006). Although children will have unique characteristics, there are some common characteristics that teachers need to understand and plan to support. These are discussed later in the chapter.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

Family. Children from low-income backgrounds are at increased risk for failure (Belfiore et al., 2005; Espinosa, 2005). Poverty and homelessness have increased over the past several decades, especially within families, and teachers need to be responsive to the needs of children (Stormont & McCathren, in press). Children living in poverty are also at increased risk for one or more of the within-child characteristics presented earlier. An additional reason children who are poor and those who are homeless are at risk is that they move frequently. For example, as many as 97% of children who are homeless move in a given year (Paquette, 2011). Extensive instructional time is lost when children move, and teachers need to be prepared to use strategies presented in this book to closely monitor their progress. In addition, children will have specific characteristics that are more unique given their needs for resources and linkages with community agencies for supports (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011). Their additional needs for collaboration with communities and other professionals to increase access to resources are addressed in Chapter 8. Parent involvement in school is a malleable risk factor associated with academic and social success and is also discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

School. Teachers often receive little preparation in their preservice education for addressing the needs of children at risk. Teachers report that they need more training in the area of supporting behavioral issues in the classroom (Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011). Further, teachers often report inaccurate knowledge related to children with ADHD (Stormont & Stebbins, 2005). In recent survey research, the majority of educators (56%) did not agree with the statement "I am confident that the interventions and practices I use have the desired impact on the student" (Stormont, Reinke, & Herman, 2011a, p. 22). The lack of education and preparation for supporting children who are at risk for failure contributes to using inappropriate and ineffective strategies. This often leads to a negative interactive cycle between teachers and children and between teachers and parents, which is discussed next.

INTERACTIONS

Perhaps the largest factor contributing to risk for children is the lack of adult support. This is especially true if children have within-child characteristics that increase risk for failure and then are not supported in learning specific skills needed to be successful in different settings. When teachers and parents have expectations for children that children cannot meet, a negative interaction cycle begins (Stormont, 2007). Practices such as punishment without support for learning appropriate behavior and retention are common and not effective (Stormont, Lewis, Beckner, & Johnson, 2008). If children are not supported in succeeding and maintain academic and behavior problems into the third grade, their likelihood of ever being successful diminishes significantly (Stormont, 2007). This is referred to as the window of opportunity for early intervention, which closes almost completely by the third grade (Walker et al., 2004). The transition to kindergarten is a critical point of development that can increase risk for both academic and social behavior problems, especially when teachers have inappropriate expectations for children upon school entry (Stormont et al., 2005).

Interaction Examples. Espinosa (2005) describes the different outcomes for two cousins with limited English and the simple strategies one teacher used to make one student feel comfortable and the negative strategies another teacher used:

Unintelligible noise is all that my cousin and I heard when we first heard English spoken to us. We clung together as we approached our school on the first day. I knew we would be all right as long as we stayed together. It never occurred to me that we would be separated and placed in different classes. Once I got over the terror at this event, I saw the friendly face of a person who held my hand and comforted me. She was my new teacher. She smiled and stayed close to me, making me feel more secure. My teacher taught me English when she could fit it into the day, sometimes over lunch. She taught me words in English and asked me to teach her words in Spanish. Once she learned some words and phrases, she taught them to the rest of the class. My new friends knew colors and how to count in Spanish, as well as basic greetings. They even learned my favorite song, "Los Pollitos." I would recite what I had learned in English and my classmates would clap for me. Sometimes we would get extra time at recess or a special activity because I had learned so many words in English and had taught

my classmates and teacher so much Spanish. My cousin had a very different experience. His teacher did not understand him, laughed at mispronounced words, and would not listen to him unless he spoke in complete sentences. He became angry and ashamed. He was sometimes punished for refusing to speak. Eventually he refused to cooperate on anything. (p. 838)

Stormont (2007) describes the failure cycle John experiences due to the interactions between his characteristics that put him at risk for failure and the responses of his teacher:

John rushes into class as the bell rings. His clothes are clean but crumpled and his zipper is unzipped. His first grade teacher expects students to be in the classroom when the bell rings, so he gets one check for this behavior. When children get three checks they miss recess. After the morning announcements and routines, the teacher asks the class to begin their writing work. A huge prompt on the board says "Writing work = Write about you" and has pictures and topics to help children generate ideas. John opens his desk to get out his folder for journal writing. He can't find it. As he removes large chunks of papers from his desk he is oblivious to the noise he is making. When he looks up, his teacher is standing over him with a disappointed look on his face. One more check. Then John remembers that his teacher keeps his journal because he keeps losing it. After he gets his journal he looks for something to write with. He can't find anything and begins asking his classmates. Then he stands up and yells, "Hey does anyone have a pencil?" One more check. He has only been in school for one hour. Unfortunately it is a typical day for John. (p. 138)

In another example of how adults interact with children to increase or decrease risk for failure, Stacey Bess (1994) describes how she attempted to connect with children living in a homeless shelter and attending a school with no name. Her lack of understanding of the children's experiences is clearly illustrated in her introduction to the children:

"I'm Stacey," I began. "I brought along a little something to help you get to know me." I held up a scrapbook with "ME" pasted on the front cover. "This is my family," I explained as I opened the book to a picture of the four of us. "This is Greg, my cute husband. This is our daughter Nichole, and this is our little boy, Brandon." So far so good. Now I wanted to establish some common ground.

“My story starts with my three favorite likes, the three Cs: children, chocolate, and Coke—Diet Coke.” As I stood there trying to convince them somehow that I could be one of them, that I could belong in their world, suddenly a mouse raced right across my feet. I jumped to the ceiling, screamed, and would have impressed Michael Jackson with my dance moves. My heart thumped in my throat as I gasped for breath and met the unblinking eyes of thirty kids staring at me in total disgust. (pp. 9–10)

If teachers feel they are in a negative interaction pattern with children and/or their parents, many simple effective strategies can be used to change this pattern. This book emphasizes (a) building positive relationships and on this foundation meeting children where they are, based on systematic data collection, and (b) teaching specific social and academic behavior to increase their success. Building positive relationships with families and other professionals is also important and discussed in Chapter 8.

Final case examples are provided by a primary-grade general educator who works very well with children at risk for failure and tries to foster resilience. She often loops with her students so she gets to work with them for two years.

Mrs. Lewis Fosters Resilience

I had a child some years back (in both first and second grade) who taught me a lot about working with kids who are at risk due to their home environment. Naya came from a family where one parent was in prison and the other had recently been released from prison. She lived with an ever-changing group of family members in quite poor conditions. Yet somehow Naya came to school every day with a smile on her face ready to learn. She went from not knowing what a book was in kindergarten to being above grade level in reading and *the* leader in the room in second grade. How? Because she said, “I’m going to be somebody.”

I just soaked up everything Naya had to teach me about kids like her, and every year since, I have had opportunities to put it into practice with my other students who are at risk.

This year I have a student, Janie. Janie mostly raises herself and her small siblings and sees more than she should at home on a regular basis. Janie has no control in her life, and fighting for control in a safe environment like school helps to meet that need. Janie’s behavior is a major

obstacle, with several office referrals for bullying, fighting, disrespect, tantrums, and noncompliance. My plan of action with Janie from the beginning of the year:

- ★ Help her learn strategies for dealing with her emotions from home in appropriate ways
- ★ Help her to see herself as worthy
- ★ Help her see herself as a leader
- ★ Help her see herself as someone who will “be somebody”

We are three-fourths of the way through the year, and I feel like Janie is finally getting there. She has had two months straight without an office referral, and her tantrums have become nearly nonexistent. I take all the opportunities I can to tell Janie how smart she is. She is a beautiful girl, but at seven years old she needs to know she is more than beautiful. We talk about what she wants to do when she goes to college. Not *if* she goes to college. I try to pick specific qualities she has and point toward that helping her in a career. “Janie you are really great at explaining this math. Maybe you will go to college to be a teacher like me.” I give Janie many opportunities to be a leader. Since Janie has very little control in her life, by giving her opportunities to help others, to lead a project, to volunteer for a kindergarten teacher, to organize something, I am giving her an opportunity to control something. I take out the emotion when dealing with consequences. “You made a poor choice, so you have to follow through with the consequences. Choose to learn from your mistake so it doesn’t happen again. Tomorrow will be a better day.” And very important . . . “I still love you even when you mess up.”

I have little contact with this particular parent, but when I do talk to Janie’s mom or any other parent of a child who is at risk I sing their praises. So often the parent is used to hearing that the kid is a behavior problem and they don’t want to listen. I tell the parent about the problems, but I am sure to put three times as many positive things about the kid in there too. Also, I leave every conversation with a parent with this advice: “Tell her she is smart. Tell her she is going to college. Tell her she is going to be somebody. Tell her every day.” At some point I hope that the kid will hear this in enough places in her life she’ll begin to believe.

COMMON RISK CHARACTERISTICS

Children who are at risk for failure tend to share characteristics, but the reasons they have the characteristics may be different. For example, children with ADHD will display specific characteristics because of the way

they process information and interact with the environment (Zentall, 2006). Children who are at risk due to limited experiences (e.g., because of poverty, homelessness, lack of stable education) will have similar characteristics, but it may be the result of a lack of the opportunity to learn and therefore to possess the prior knowledge required to be successful. For example, children at risk due to poverty enter kindergarten and may not have certain early language and literacy experiences (Espinosa, 2005), whereas children with ADHD may have had these experiences but may not have paid attention to the key features being discussed (Barkley, 2005). English learners with limited proficiency may exhibit characteristics similar to other students who are at risk, but their characteristics and needs are brought about by the process and demands of second-language acquisition as well as other risk factors they may face in their lives (Coyne et al., 2011; Espinosa, 2005; Stormont, 2007).

Children at risk for failure who are the focus of this book often have many of the following common characteristics:

- ★ **Attention problems.** Children may have a hard time coming to attention, focusing their attention on the right thing, and sustaining their attention.
- ★ **Impulsivity.** Children may have a hard time waiting their turn and taking turns. Children who are impulsive blurt out answers and have problems with thinking before acting.
- ★ **Hyperactivity.** Some children are more active than others and need to move more. Activity needs can be met through increasing opportunities to talk and physically move.
- ★ **Memory problems.** Children may have problems working with information long enough to get it to their long-term memories. Children may also have problems retrieving information from their long-term memories when needed.
- ★ **Limited motivation.** Children may not be engaged and interested in learning in general or learning specific things. Children may not see how things relate to them or may be more focused on other things that are troubling them. If children have limited skills in a specific area, they will probably be less motivated in that area. If the task is challenging, they may need an incentive to complete the task.
- ★ **Organization problems.** Children with organization problems often struggle in two areas of organization. One area is object organization, which includes knowing where their things are, bringing back homework, and having needed supplies for class. Children with object organization problems lose things frequently and often don't develop routines that other children develop to become more organized (Zentall, Harper, & Stormont-Spurgin, 1993). Children with organization problems also often struggle with time/planning

organization and need support managing complex projects and tasks such as those that are long term or have multiple steps, processes, and components (Zentall, 2006).

- ★ **Limited knowledge/skills.** Children with limited knowledge of English or with limited knowledge of academic content need support to more fully participate in class lessons and activities (Coyne et al., 2011; Espinosa, 2005; Stormont, 2007). Understanding where children are in terms of their knowledge and skills is critical for providing this support.
- ★ **Problem behavior.** Teachers most frequently report concerns related to disruptive behavior in elementary classrooms (Reinke et al., 2011). However, children often have other problem behaviors as well, including aggression, noncompliance, and internalizing behaviors such as being withdrawn, anxious, or depressed. Children with problem behaviors are at great risk for peer rejection and academic failure. Children need support in learning more socially appropriate ways to interact in their environments.
- ★ **Increased need for positive parent-teacher involvement.** Children who are at risk for failure need teachers and parents to work more closely to support their social, emotional, and academic success. Chapter 8 addresses this topic.

SUMMARY

- ★ In schools today, many children are at risk for failure.
- ★ Children who are the focus of this book are those who tend to fall through the cracks.
- ★ Children with ADHD, limited knowledge and skills, and problem behavior are at increased risk for failure.
- ★ Family and school environments interact with children's characteristics and increase or decrease children's risk for failure.
- ★ Teachers need to focus on common characteristics and build their ability to provide supports to lessen risk.