

At Risk of Becoming At Risk

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Educators are nearly equal to parents when considering the impact they have on the lives of students. We teach children how to think, what should be considered important information, and how they should lead their lives. Other aspects of our students' lives are simply out of our control, such as socioeconomic status. Yet it is important to realize that even if we cannot fix certain things, we can most definitely guide our students through them. When protecting at-risk students, we need to consider the child's socioeconomic status, possible negative pressure from peers, and the issue of potential bullying.

First of all, the socioeconomic status of our students could vary widely, but it is considered to be the ultimate determinant when considering academic success. The upper class students will have nearly inexhaustible resources available to them and students hailing from the middle class will be supported by parents eager to see their children succeed in life, even if money is not always free-flowing. Students making up the lower, often impoverished, class are less likely to partake in school events because they do not have the money, time, or support.

A viable concern for educators is whether or not students coming from low socioeconomic homes feel worthy enough academically or socially. There is a stereotypical view among most people, including educators, that students from poor backgrounds are less likely to succeed in school. This stereotype is not limited to the thinking of middle and upper class citizens, but has been known to pervade the lower class mentality as well. This is particularly dangerous for students coming from the lower class because if they feel they are predisposed to failure, they are less likely to make an effort.

There are strategies that can be employed so as to avoid low SES students from becoming students at risk. One useful strategy is in pairing low SES students with peers hailing from

different backgrounds and with different interests and strengths. The purpose of this is to demonstrate to the students that they do not have to be grouped into one category because of their financial situation, family makeup, ethnic background, or hobbies. A subconscious understanding of equality and acceptance will develop amongst all students. A second useful strategy is to encourage any and all interests. If students are interested in something, nurture that interest and the hope that it is a possible venue out of poverty.

A second problem that could easily put students at risk is that of peer pressure. Peer pressure can be both positive and negative, but it is the negative pressure from friends and classmates that greatly jeopardizes a student's chances at academic achievement. The most common form of negative peer pressure involves substance abuse. The need to feel accepted by classmates often drives students to experiment with alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs. Experimentation with substances often leads to experimentation with other, much more serious things. Vandalism could very well be the next step students take to fit into a certain group of people and this can easily escalate into other actions, such as stealing.

As evidenced, negative peer pressure has the capacity to send students into a downward spiral of delinquency. An important note regarding self-esteem should also be made. Kids, primarily teenagers, may partake in these activities so that they feel *cool*. Yet the feelings of guilt and uncertainty that accompany such actions could very well lead to even lower self-esteem issues. It is an undisputed fact that teenagers already have to combat racing hormones and changing attitudes. Negative peer pressure will only serve to exacerbate these problems. As effective educators, we need to help steer our students along a safe, healthy path. This can be done by, as said before, encouraging individual interests and being active listeners and mentors.

A third risk factor is bullying, an old practice of demeaning others through tactics of insulting, ridiculing, and spreading rumors. Bullying has a significant impact on how a student views himself or herself, and the safety and security, or lack of such, that students feel in a school environment. Self-esteem is always an issue because victims of bullying are made to feel inferior. This is achieved by comments made about their skin color, weight, stature, abilities, or interests. This self-doubt, if not avoided or corrected early enough, could have lasting damage on a how a student feels about his or her abilities. If they doubt their intelligence, for example, they are less likely to put genuine effort into schoolwork. Next is the issue of whether or not students feel safe. If a girl or boy is harassed every time he or she steps through the school doors, they will begin to fear social interaction. This fear is often translated into hatred for all things school related since school is the place where the harassment is based. This hatred of school may lead students to neglect their studies, forcing them to fall behind in the curriculum and overall system.

Educators and administrators need to become familiar with the telltale signs of bullying and with procedures on how to stop it. This can be done by regularly assuring all students that they always have an outlet through them, the educator. By developing a trusting and caring relationship with students, teachers can help insure that kids, no matter the age, may turn to adults for assistance versus turning to violence or suicide to escape bullying problems.

These three factors are only a few of the issues that put students at risk for academic failure. It is the duty of educators to regularly educate themselves with other risk factors and how they can properly address them. Yet it is my belief that things such as socioeconomic status, negative peer pressure, and bullying do not need to be the sole determinants of whether or not a young person succeeds in school.