

Spotlight: The family conflict and family attachment risk & protective factor scales

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Utah
Prevention
Network



The risk and protective factor model of adolescent problem behaviors

The risk and protective factor model of adolescent problem behaviors was developed at the University of Washington's Social Development Research Group.¹ The model identifies a variety of risk factors (RFs) and protective factors (PFs) that predict 5 problem behaviors in adolescence: substance abuse, school drop out, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and violence. RFs and PFs are organized into 4 domains that encompass the main areas of a young person's life: community, family, school, and individual/peers. Each RF/PF in the model is connected to at least 1 of these problem behaviors (most are connected to more than 1). Additional RFs have been added to the model as new research connects RFs to the problem behaviors. We are fortunate in Utah to have the Utah Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) Survey,² which collects data which are used by prevention professionals and communities to facilitate the delivery of effective prevention services throughout the state. In this data brief, we take a closer look at the data available for the family conflict risk factor and the family attachment protective factor, which both fall within the family domain.

The family conflict risk factor scale

Whether between parents or between parents and children, research has connected the presence of high family conflict to all 5 adolescent problem behaviors in the risk and protective factor model. This risk factor is measured through a 3-question scale that focuses on interpersonal conflict within the family (see below). The scale score is calculated by averaging the responses across the 3 items, and each participant is categorized as either low risk or higher risk based on the cut points established for each grade level that predict a greater likelihood of problem behaviors.

Family conflict risk factor scale items:	
People in my family often insult or yell at each other.	Definitely no, somewhat no, somewhat yes, definitely yes
We argue about the same things in my family over and over.	
People in my family have serious arguments.	

The family attachment protective factor scale

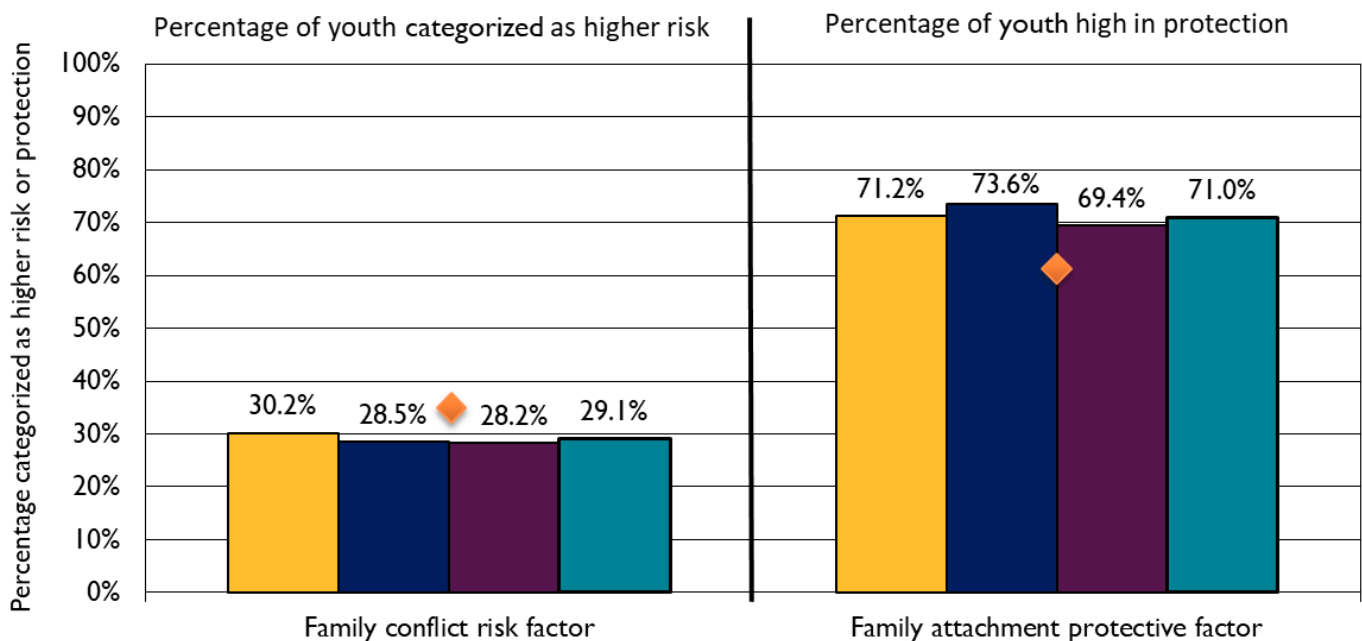
In contrast to risk factors, protective factors shield or buffer individuals from the likelihood of engaging in problem behaviors. Family attachment relates to protection that results from bonding with family members, particularly parents. When youth are bonded to their parents, and parents communicate healthy beliefs and clear standards for their children, the impact of this protective factor is powerful. The family attachment protective factor has historically been measured through a 4-question scale that asks youth if they feel close to, as well as if they share their thoughts and feelings with, their mother and father (see below). The scale score is calculated by averaging the responses across the 4 items, and each participant is categorized as either high or

low in protection based on the cut points established for each grade level that predict a greater likelihood of problem behaviors. Note: Starting with the 2025 SHARP Survey, this scale was shortened to 2 questions combining the separate items for mothers and fathers to *parents/caregivers*.

Family attachment protective factor scale—Original items:	
Do you feel very close to your mother?	Definitely no, somewhat no, somewhat yes, definitely yes
Do you feel very close to your father?	
Do you share your thoughts and feelings with your mother?	
Do you share your thoughts and feelings with your father?	
Family attachment protective factor scale—New items for 2025:	
Do you feel very close to your parents/caregivers?	Definitely no, somewhat no, somewhat yes, definitely yes
Do you share your thoughts and feelings with your parents/caregivers?	

Figure 1 shows the trend data in Utah for the family conflict risk factor scale and the family attachment protective factor scale from 2017 through 2023. A national norm (orange diamond) is also provided for comparison purposes. When examining the chart, it is important to understand that for **risk factors**, *higher values indicate greater levels of risk* (and a *higher* likelihood for problem behaviors), while for **protective factors**, *higher values indicate greater levels of protection* (and a *lower* likelihood of problem behaviors). Historically, Utah youth have lower risk and higher protection than their national counterparts on these 2 risk/protective factors. This has been true for all grades surveyed for the past several years. For example, in 2023 the

Figure 1. Youth categorized as higher risk/protection for family conflict and family attachment: Utah (grades 6-12 combined) vs. national comparison 2017-2023 (SHARP)

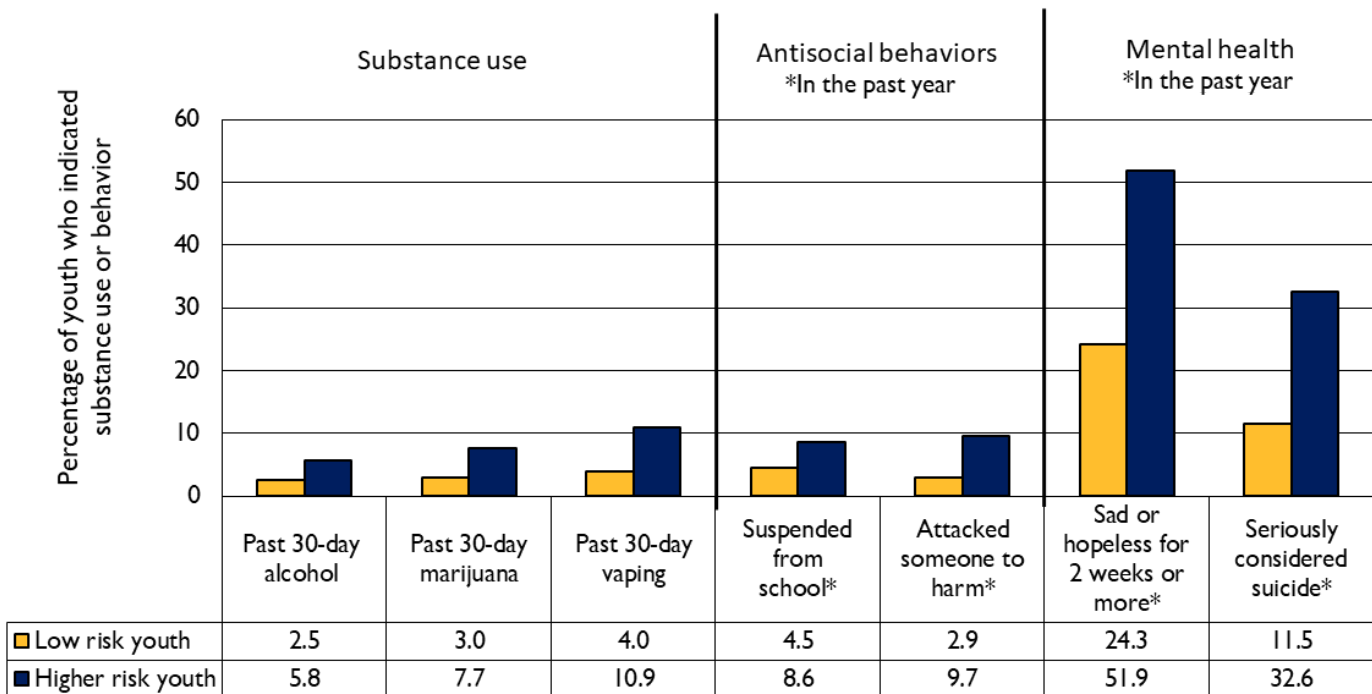


percentage of Utah youth (in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 combined) categorized as higher risk on the family conflict risk factor scale was 29.1%, while the national comparison was 36.1%. The data for the family attachment protective factor were also favorable. In 2023, the percentage of Utah youth categorized as high in protection for the family attachment risk factor was 71.0%, while the national comparison was 60.6%.

Examining the relationships between family conflict and family attachment to substance use, anti-social behaviors, and mental health

Not surprisingly, risk and protective factors within the family domain are very important predictors of problem behaviors in youth. In fact, research suggests that every risk factor in the family domain predicts all 5 problem behaviors within the risk and protective factor framework. Figure 2 illustrates how the family conflict risk factor scale relates to substance use, antisocial behavior, mental health distress, and suicidal ideation. Youth categorized as higher risk for family conflict were more likely to report 30-day use of alcohol, marijuana, and vaping than those who were categorized as low risk (5.8% of higher risk youth indicated alcohol use vs. 2.5% of lower risk youth; 7.7% vs. 3.0% for marijuana use, etc.). Similar relationships were observed for antisocial behaviors, mental health distress, and suicidal ideation. Higher risk youth were more likely to have been suspended from school (8.6% for higher risk youth vs. 4.5% for low risk youth), and to have attacked someone to harm in the past year (9.7% for higher risk youth vs. 2.9% for low risk youth), as well as report feeling sad or

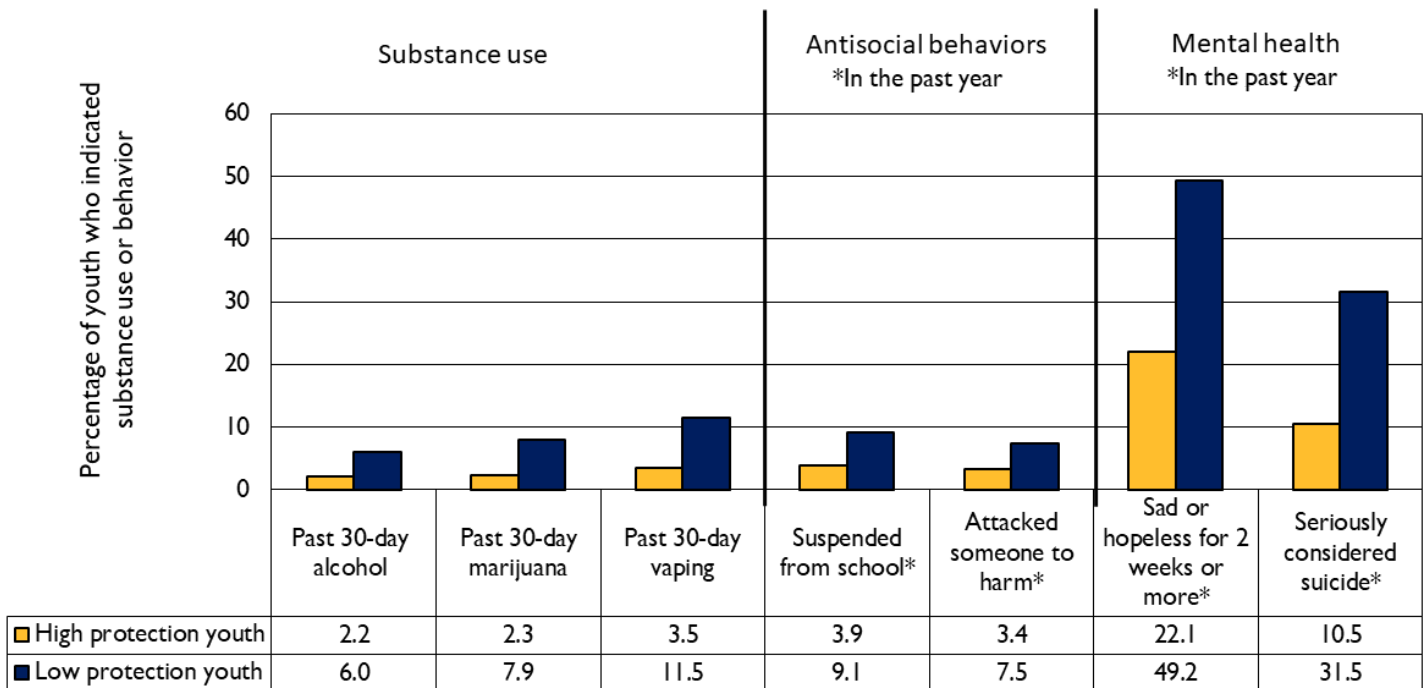
Figure 2. Substance use, antisocial behaviors & mental health outcomes based on family conflict risk status -Utah 2023 (SHARP)



hopeless almost every day for 2 weeks or more in a row (51.9% for higher risk youth vs. 24.3% for low risk youth), and to have seriously considered suicide in the past year (32.6% for higher risk youth vs. 11.5% for low risk youth).

Figure 3 illustrates how the family attachment protective factor scale relates to the same substance use, antisocial behavior, and mental health/suicidal ideation rates. Youth categorized as high in protection for family attachment were *less likely* to report 30-day use of alcohol, marijuana, and vaping than those who were categorized as low in protection (2.2% of high protection youth indicated alcohol use vs. 6.0% of low protection youth; 2.3% vs.7.9% for marijuana use, etc.). Similarly, high protection youth were *less likely* to have been suspended from school (3.9% vs. 9.1%, respectively), and to have attacked to harm in the past year (3.4% vs. 7.5%), as well as report feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 weeks (22.1% vs. 49.2%), and to have seriously considered suicide in the past year (10.5% vs. 31.5%).

Figure 3. Substance use, antisocial behaviors & mental health outcomes based on family attachment protection status-Utah 2023 (SHARP)



In looking at the family conflict and family attachment data, it is clear that these risk/protective factors are important predictors of problem behaviors in youth. We are fortunate that risk levels in Utah are lower than the national comparison. At the same time, Utah youth report higher levels of protection than their national comparisons for family attachment. Taken together, these data provide evidence that Utah families, overall, are

doing well when it comes to family risk and protective factors. From a prevention perspective, it is important to further support parents and youth in ways that help maintain high levels of protection and lower risk to ensure the continued health and well-being of Utah youth.

[1]Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., & Miller, J. Y. (1992). Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: Implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112(1), 64–105. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.112.1.64>

[2]The SHARP survey measures the health of Utah youth and the risk and protective factors that predict these health and problem behaviors in adolescents. The survey is administered across the state every other year to Utah students in grades 6 through 12.

This data brief was prepared for the Utah State Epidemiological Outcomes Workgroup by Bach Harrison, LLC. Visit <https://utahprevention.org/> to learn more about prevention efforts to reduce substance abuse and misuse.