

RISK AND PROTECTION FOR ADOLESCENTS ENGAGED IN PRACTICES OF OFFENSIVE CONDUCT

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ABSTRACT:

Adolescence is a crucial stage of human development, and adolescents are vulnerable to risk factors associated with adaptations at the developmental stages. The objective of this study was to describe the experience of adolescents exposed to risks and the protective factors that lead to the development of risky behaviors, specifically offensive conduct, considering aspects highlighted in the literature, such as family; psychological development; attitude; social behavior; schooling; relationships with peers; leisure activities and alcohol and drugs use. Twenty-four male teenagers were interviewed, 12 of them considered with good social adaptation (recruited from public schools) and 12 had a criminal conduct (recruited from hearings at the District Attorney office). The aim was to underscore variables that appear to promote maladaptive responses, acting as a risk factors, and to ensure adaptive responses as protective factors against adversities. The data collected were subjected to the content analysis. The results indicated that adolescents with good social adjustment, although subject to risk factors, especially within the family, are exposed to more protective factors than youth offenders, especially in the school environment. This group can be considered, therefore, vulnerable due to lack of protective factors. This aspect should be considered in preventive interventional programs in this area.

Key words: adolescent; risk; protection; social development.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a crucial period of human development because it is time for important cognitive, emotional and social changes, and it is also a period in which habits and behavior patterns are acquired¹. However, it should be considered that adolescents are one of the most vulnerable groups dealing with the problems arising from the structure and functioning of society². In that respect, the exposure of young people to violence stands out

and involves the segment that carries out the role of the victim and/or the aggressor. During this phase, in addition to the intense psychological and physical transformations, several factors may influence the adolescent development: they become more independent from their parents, give more value to their peers and explore many situations in which they may not yet know how to deal with.

In Brazil, there is some evidence that in recent decades, the number of violent episodes involving adolescents as protagonists is increasing^{3,4}. It is

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interesting to observe that crimes are being committed by younger age groups^{5,6}. The media reports have intensively explore youth crime in Brazil, although the scientific investigations that seek to better understand this phenomenon are still scarce. Therefore, it is necessary to know the variables that could help increase the likelihood of adaptive responses and of those that could promote the maladaptive responses in adolescence. This knowledge is surely fundamental for the development of programs aimed at the youth.

It is known that the psychosocial development in adolescence is permeated by risk behaviors, which are defined as the participation in activities that could endanger the physical and mental health of the youth. Many of these types of behavior can be just exploratory in nature and exist under the influence of the environment; however, in some cases, such conducts may become part of the repertoire and bring some significantly negative consequences for the individual, family and social levels⁷. In these cases, a process of social maladaptation may occur. Here, the definition of adaptation (or maladaptation) refers to how the individual copes with the social environment, manages this relationship, and is able to live successfully in an environment that offers living conditions that can be more or less adverse⁷.

According to the Transactional Model, the psychosocial development of an individual is the final result of the balance between (transaction) the protective and the risk factors present in different segments⁸. Protective factors are defined as influences that modify, improve or change personal responses to deal with adversities (or risk factors) that predispose to maladaptive results⁹. Risk factors have been broadly defined as those characteristics, variables, or hazards that, if present for a given individual, make it more likely that this individual, rather than someone selected from the general population, will develop a disorder^{10,11}.

The scientific literature emphasizes the risk and protective factors more consistently with regard to adolescent risk behaviors, specifically those linked to criminal behavior. A systematization of the major evidence in this field is presented below, listing the factors and the related indicators based on some references^{7,12,15}.

The main purpose of this study was to describe the experience of adolescents with regard to their exposure to risk and protective factors when it comes to the development of risk behaviors, specifically an offence.

METHODS

Twenty four male adolescents participated in this study; six from each age group aged between 14 and 17 years. Twelve high school adolescents

were recruited in a state public school located in a mid-sized city in the interior of São Paulo State. This group consisted of teenagers appointed by the school who were socially adaptive (good academic performance, with no behavioral problems at school and no involvement with alcohol/drugs, or a history of offences). The other twelve adolescents were recruited in the Public Prosecutor's Office of a county also located in city of São Paulo during a hearing due their arrest by the local police authorities after committing an offence. Half of these teenagers have already being charged by other crimes and were being sued. Moreover, most of these adolescents were using alcohol and other drugs, according to the information described in the lawsuit.

Data collection was carried out using interviews focusing on the following issues: childhood, family, behavior/attitudes/beliefs, school/work (routine activities), recreation, friendships and experiences with alcohol/drugs and/or offences based on the literature that involves risk and protective factors.

The semi-structured script set a general question to guide the collection of information, such as "Tell me a little bit about your family". It also predicted a series of topics indicative of important information being collected, according to the literature reviews on risk and protection.

The content analysis technique proposed by BARDIN was used for data treatment¹⁶. Each interview was analyzed qualitatively for a better understanding of its content and for the categorization of answers; In addition, a quantitative analysis was performed to observe frequency of responses in each category and in each of the groups studied. Subsequently a comparison was made between the groups to point out the differences and similarities between them and to emphasize what seemed more significant in terms of exposure to risk and protection for the group of adjudicated adolescents.

This study was developed within the framework of a larger research project, which was examined and approved by the Ethics Committee of the FFCLRP-USP (CEP Protocol N. 08-2019.0.000.222).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results in each group are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. The results are displayed in two ways: first, those obtained through the analysis of reports produced by adolescents with good social adjustment, and second, by the adolescents involved with juvenile delinquency and violence. For each group, the categories are identified from the contents of the interviews and the frequency of responses (adolescents), followed by the comparison between the two groups.

Table 1: Main risk factors for risk behaviors in adolescence identified in the literature

Risk factors	
Domain	
Family	Indicators
Poor family educational practices	Practices characterized by unclear expectations towards behavior, absence of limits, few and inconsistent rewards for positive behavior; harsh or inconsistent punishment for undesirable behavior; consistent and inefficient discipline, with high level of physical violence, absence/abandonment/neglect of parents and weak affective ties increase the risk of drug abuse, delinquency and violence.
High social conflict	Growing up in families with many conflicts, even if the child is not directly involved.
Abusive use of alcohol and other drugs/ attitudes towards the use of drugs	Growing up in families whose adult members have a history of alcoholism or abuse of other drugs, or are tolerant to the use by the child/adolescent, are more likely to use drugs.
Attitudes favorable to anti-social behavior	Families in which the parents commit crimes or are tolerant to the involvement of the child/youngster in criminal or violent behaviors.
Adverse family conditions	Diseases or incidents involving the family members; parental illness or death and loss of loved ones; Separation, divorce or parents' remarriage; Living in a single-parent family;
Unfavorable family structure	House with no basic infrastructure and too small to accommodate a large number of people, low household income, low parental education level, unemployment.
Individual factors: psychosocial development and behavior	Indicators
Restlessness	Young people who feel they are not part of society, do not feel constrained by the rules, have no sense of guilt and tend to be hostile, often getting involved in fights, destruction of public properties, arson and vandalism. Those who do not believe that will be successful or responsible, and those who assume an active and rebellious attitude against society.
Egocentricity/Insensitivity to others	Be insensible to others. Impulsivity, attention deficit and poor verbal ability Young people who act impulsively, without thinking, especially in conflict situations.
Constant search for exciting sensations Early onset of antisocial behavior	Young people who like to engage in risky and exciting behavior. The sooner the manifestation of an anti-social behavior, the more frequent and long-lasting it will be. The same idea applies to a delinquent behavior and the use of alcohol and other drugs. In this context, the early institutionalization for treatment tends to increase behavioral problems.
Favorable attitudes toward drug use	The initiation of the use of any substance is preceded by favorable values to its use. Young people who express positive attitudes towards the use of drugs, including lower risk perception of the use of substances.
Favorable attitudes towards antisocial behavior	Young people who express positive attitudes with respect to delinquency and violence.
School/academic factors	Indicators
Academic failure	Academic failure – poor performance, aggressive behavior in the classroom, significant school gap, repetition, lack of motivation to study, irregular attendance and/or truancy/few years of study/low schooling level. Intense desire to be independent combined with little interest/school investment. Poor family supervision as to school attendance.
Poor commitment to school activities	Not willing to continue studying; not interested in school, little or no time spent on homework; the idea that doing homework is not relevant.
Unfavorable school/ institutional conditions	There is little clarity on what the proposed rules mean in schools and little reinforcement of such rules (without any consequences in case those are not followed correctly) and ineffective instruction (low-quality teaching).
Risk factors at work	Indicators
Failure at work	Feeling like a failure at work/experiencing successive failures
Friends	Indicators
Anti-social peers	Relationship with those who abuse alcohol and other drugs; carry weapons and/or commit offences; exhibit violent behavior- adolescents and/or adults.
Peer approval for anti-social behavior	Young people who believe that their friends and classmates approve and admire if they engage in drug use, delinquency and violence.
Rejection by classmates/isolation	Young people who feel rejected and despised by their classmates.

Table 2: Main protective factors for risk behaviors in adolescence identified in the literature

Domain	Protective Factors
Family	Indicators
Recognition for the involvement in pro-social activities in the family	Adolescents who are rewarded and recognized for their involvement in pro-social activities in the family are more likely to participate in such activities.
Family ties	Adolescents who have good relationship with their parents (or their legal guardians) and report strong emotional connection and affective ties towards them.
Favorable family relationship	Growing up in a family environment free of violence, which provides cohesion, sense of belonging, coziness and stability, in which relations are permeated by affection, dialogue, balance of power/limits, mutual respect, reciprocity/support, and adequate care.
Consistent discipline	Consistent discipline, with an education based on parental monitoring (clear presentation of limits).
Individual factors: psychological development and behavior	Indicators
Easy Temperament	Children/young people with easy temperament and are able to recover from emotional situations very rapidly.
Positive personal attributes	Dispositional attributes such as autonomy, high self-esteem, subjective well-being, intelligence and positive social orientation (mental representation of positive affection) as well as emotional competence, sense of humor, optimism, tolerance to suffering, and emotional stability. Ability to solve problems, decision-making skills, evaluation of experiences as challenges (not threats). Ability to envision the future and plan for it, and expectations of success in the future.
Sociability	Children/young people who are nice and socially outgoing.
Religion	Young people who are more frequently involved in organized religious activities.
Belief in moral values/rules	Young people who hold strong moral beliefs.
Involvement in social tasks	Young people are strongly involved in social tasks (e.g. solve social problems, show great respect and tolerance to other, and know how to communicate well).
Academic / school factors	Indicators
Good academic performance/investment in education	Attend school, present good academic performance, do homework/assignments.
Good relationship with teachers	Maintain good relationship with teachers or people who play an important role in their lives and make them feel wanted in the school setting.
Opportunities for involvement in pro-social school programs	Young people, who participate in academic activities, do their homework and have more opportunities to engage in pro-social activities at school.
Recognition for their involvement in the school pro-social activities	Adolescents who are rewarded and recognized for their involvement in the school pro-social activities are more likely to participate in such activities.
Favorable school environment	Schools that promote relationships of affection, respect, dialogue and trust among students, teachers and staff; encourage socialization in the school setting and recognize students as protagonists; lead to the construction of a sense of belonging, which is regarded as a protective factor.
Favorable school conditions	Schools that offer extra class activities, group work, financial and material resources necessary for the activities.
Friends	Indicators
Classmate ties in pro-social activities	Young people with strong emotional connection to their classmates who are engaged in pro-social behaviors; they stay away from drugs and delinquent behaviors, which help them maintain a good relationship with their friends.

As suggested by the transactional model, the results showed that the adolescents with good social adjustment are exposed to risk factors, however, at the same time, they experience the protective factors that seem to guarantee their development.

The family is the domain that presents more risk factors. It is worth observing that most

categories listed refer to adverse events in family history aiming at changing the initial configuration: separation/divorce or loss of one of the parents by death, compete for the rearrangements in the configuration (single-parenthood and reconstitution). It also draws the attention, when the risks are considered, the fact that parents/

Table 3: Risk and protective factors identified in the sample of adolescents with good social adjustment

RISK FACTORS		Protective Factors	
FAMILY/PARENTS (GUARDIANS)			
Experienced parents' separation (divorce) (2) Live in single-parent family (1) Live in new-constituted family (2) Father's death (1) Responsible parent (unemployed) (1) Witnessed many family conflicts (1) Grew up in families whose members (adults) had a history of alcoholism (3) Chronic illness (mental) or accident, causing chronic problem of health in those responsible for the family (2) Disciplined by means of physical violence (in the past) (3) Suffer from poor parent-child relationship (1)		Live in a cohesive family environment. There are conflicts, but these are managed to maintain the family together. No violence is used to solve the problems (8) Subjected to consistent disciplinary educational practices - supervision, dialogue, and no physical punishment (9) Good parent-child relationship (8)	
RISK FACTORS		Protective Factors	
SCHOOL			
Poor attitude towards the studies (4) History of repetition in school (2) Aggressive/disruptive behavior in the classroom/school (in the past) (1)		Attend school (12) Consider having good school performance (10) Good teacher-student relationship (presently) (10) Interest in materials and studies/plans/projects related to education (academic expectations) (9) Participation in pro-social activities in school, in extra-curriculum activities (6)	
RISK FACTORS		Protective Factors	
RELATIONSHIP WITH PEERS			
Involvement with classmates who make use of drugs (3)		Avoid joining peers who use drugs and/or who have antisocial behavior (4)	
RISK FACTORS		Protective Factors	
PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT/BEHAVIOR			
History of antisocial behavior (although not an offence) (3) Impulsiveness (3) Frequent involvement in fights (in the past) (1)		Usually reflect and plan before getting involved in conflict situations (6)	

guardians, in some cases, present chronic problems, such as those related to health, mental health and alcoholism. This explains the **long-term** implications of **children's exposure to adversities**.

With regard to the relationship dynamics, a certain "detachment" was observed in the relationship between the adolescent and their parents/guardians. However, according to the reports, the most predominant aspect was the intra-familial violence, both in terms of parental practices (some adolescents claimed that were spanked by their parents) and in the relationship between the adults/spouses (with indications that there were many quarrels/and disagreements). It is necessary to emphasize, however, that the exposure to such risk factors, were restricted to the past and did not occur anymore.

Another risk to be considered is the "unemployment" of those responsible, although this factor can be thought of as circumstantial, and could be overcome before causing some substantial changes in the family.

What seems to work as protection in the family was the prevalence of factors related to the relationship dynamics, i.e. all the references made by the adolescents indicated the existence of some quality interactions within the family (in addition to the absence of violence, at present), which would

further contribute to the family cohesion and the adolescent's closer relationship with at least one of those responsible. This functional characteristic seems to overcome the negative impact of the adverse events and/or parental difficulties, chronic and/or circumstantial, contributing to the adaptive development of the adolescent.

Considering the domain "school" and the possible risk factors present in the adolescent's school life, few statements were made by this group. Some were not motivated towards studies, others said they had a history of repetition and one reported behavioral problems in school (but not presently). However, several positive aspects involving the school life seemed to be working as a protective factor for these adolescents, regarding the fact that all adolescents were presently studying. The reports on the school experience indicated that the majority had good performance and interest in studies by referring to their favorite subjects, in addition to having academic expectations i.e. their future plans involved "continuity of studies" (at technical and academic levels). The good relationship with some teachers is also emphasized. Some adolescents have pointed out that they were participating in extra-curricular and pro-social activities offered by the school, which shows that the **school** is indeed a context for **socialization**.

These results confirm that the school context proved to be a positive environment for these

adolescents who can establish healthy ties, strive and engage in school and extra-curricular activities with the intension of setting expectations for their academic growth. Among all the domains analyzed, the school provided the greatest number of indications related to the protective factors.

In the domain "friends/peers", the risk and protection experienced refer to the choice of classmates/friends. Some adolescents have classmates with delinquent behavior, especially those making use of substances. However, other adolescents indicated the opposite and revealed that they avoid getting involved with those using drugs and/or presenting any other antisocial behavior. Instead, they prefer to get together with adolescents with pro-social behavior, which would certain act as a protective factor.

For the psychological development (attitudes and behaviors), according to the adolescent's reports, acting impulsively in some social situations and a history of behavioral problems, such as the frequent involvement in fights with peers, could inhibit such development. On the other hand, protection would indicate the ability to reflect and plan an action with the intent to make decisions based on minor damages in a conflict situation.

A summary of the results obtained from the adolescents involved with offence acts is presented below.

It was found that the adolescents in conflict with the law, as well as those with good social adaptation are also exposed to risk and protective factors. However, in the transaction between these factors, it is assumed that, due to the presence of persistent offences, the protection offered by the identified factors is not sufficient to compensate for the negative effects of the risk factors to which they are subjected.

In the domain "family", it is interesting to observe that the adolescents of both groups have also experienced events that have caused great impact on the family, such as the father's death and the couple's separation, and consequently they ended up living in a single-parent or in a reconstituted family. This group also reveals the experience of living with adults presenting some chronic problems such as alcoholism, but also interacting with adult criminality. With regard to events, "unemployment" of the responsible ones can also be considered, although this is a circumstantial factor.

For the family dynamics, the adolescents reported that they were presently living in a conflicting environment, being disciplined through physical punishment (physical violence) and/or submitted to inconsistent educational practices (or with no rules).

Table 4: Risk and protective factors identified in the sample of adolescents involved in offences

RISK FACTORS		PROTECTIVE FACTORS	
FAMILY/PARENTS (GUARDIANS)			
Experienced parents' separation (divorce) (3) Live in single-parent family (2) Living in new-constituted family (3) Father's death (1) Responsible parent (unemployed) (1) Grew up in families whose members (adults) had a history of alcoholism (3) Responsible involved with the practice of offence acts (1) Living in family involved with many conflicts (4) Disciplined by means of physical violence (2) Inconsistent educational /disciplinary practices (1) Suffer from poor parent-child relationship (5)		Live in a cohesive family environment. There are conflicts, but these are managed to maintain the family together. No violence is used to solve the problems (4) Subjected to consistent disciplinary educational practices – supervision, dialogue, and no physical punishments (4) Good parent-child relationship (6)	
RISK FACTORS		PROTECTIVE FACTORS	
SCHOOL			
Poor attitude towards the studies (9) History of repetition in school (4) Aggressive/disruptive behavior in the classroom/school (in the past) (7) Present age ,school year gap (6) Dropped out from school (9)		Attend school (3) Good teacher-student relationship (in the past) (3)	
RISK FACTORS		PROTECTIVE FACTORS	
RELATIONSHIP WITH PEERS			
Involvement with delinquent/ criminal adolescents and/or adults (10) Involvement with classmates who make use of drugs (9)			
RISK FACTORS		PROTECTIVE FACTORS	
PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT/BEHAVIOR			
History of anti-social behavior: used or are using alcoholic beverages and/or other drugs (8) Impulsivity (9) Don't feel constrained by rules (8) Absence of guilt (related to fight situations, when someone was hurt) (5)		Usually reflect and plan before acting in situations of conflict (3)	

With regard to the protective factors in the family context, for this group, the exact same indications were observed in the group with good social adaptation: live in cohesive family environment, be subjected to a consistent educational practice and have a good relationship with at least one of those responsible.

In the domain "school", on one hand, the lack of motivation to study is emphasized and most of them dropped out of school, which denotes repetition, school gap, associated with low school performance. Furthermore, some adolescents in this group also reported that they exhibited behavioral problems in school/classroom, indicating difficulty in school adaptation.

On the other hand, when protection is considered, the school attendance refers to only a few adolescents. Some have also reported experiencing good relationship with their teachers, which would have a great effect on their involvement with the school activities.

In the domain "peers", only two indications referring to risk factors were identified; however, they were made by most adolescents: the association with delinquent/criminal adolescents and/or adults and friends using illegal drug friends. There was no indication of protective factors that could minimize the impact of possible risks.

In the domain "personal" there were an expressive number of indications of risk factors. In terms of behavior, a persistent risk conduct was observed, which seems to indicate an atypical psychosocial development. Most teenagers of this group had already committed offences, such as driving without license, participated in fights where somebody was hurt, carried and dealt with drug, carried weapons and stole something. Most of them also claimed they had used or are still making use of alcohol and/or other drugs regularly. It is worth mentioning that the majority of them started the involvement with such substances earlier, between ages 10 and 13. Regarding the psychological aspects, most participants reported that they act impulsively, are not restrained by the rules in different contexts, and do not feel any guilt when they fight and somebody gets hurt.

As a counterpoint, for personal attributes, some declared they usually reflect, think and plan before acting in conflict situations (i.e. not being impulsive).

Differences and similarities between the groups

The comparison between the groups in this study aims to point out the differences and similarities between them and emphasize what seems significantly effective in terms of exposure to risks and protection, mainly with regard to the involvement of adolescents with offences.

Firstly, the main focus is on the fact that all the adolescents, of all groups, are exposed to a wide range of risk factors, most of those seem to

concentrate in the domain "family". What differentiates the groups in that particular domain seems to be the nature of the risk which presently prevails for the adolescents engaged in offences: they would be still experiencing a family dynamics marked by conflicts and being subjected to inappropriate parenting practices, which would include physical violence. It should be emphasized that the adverse events focusing on the families and their altered constitution, as well as some of the problematic situations presented by the adults (particularly alcohol) are equivalent in both groups. This reveals that maybe they do not play an important role in relation to problematic situation in question. In this regard, the fact that the juvenile offenders have exposure to delinquent adults is more significant and can serve as a model.

For the protective factors related to this specific domain, there are similar indications in both groups. What does differentiate the groups is the fact that is the number of boys who referred to such factors in either groups, and that those would be more present among the adolescents with good social adaptation.

In the domain "school", some important differences characterize the groups. The most relevant - exposure to risk - relates to the fact that those adolescents in conflict with the law were drop outs. However, it is necessary to consider that none of the adolescents with good adaptation presents this characteristic because of the bias created by the research method, which was used to recruit the participants of such group in the school context.

Another important aspect to be highlighted here concerns the significant difference between the groups in relation to the indications of protective factors. On one hand, there is a wide range of positive school experiences that permeate what seems to work as protection for the group with good adaptation, since it favors a strong and good connection with their own education. On the other hand, there are few statements made by a few juvenile offenders about the positive aspects involving the school, which could serve as protection.

For "relationship with peers", there are indications of the adolescents' involvement with others who use drugs in both groups. The difference between the groups, in terms of exposure to risk factors, seems to be the fact that the juvenile offenders are associated with other teens exhibiting a delinquent behavior, in addition to the use of drugs. In parallel, a distinct difference becomes relevant in terms of aspects which can serve as protection. In the group with good adaptation, there is an indication that the adolescents avoid being with peers involved with drugs and/or anti-social behavior. This characterizes a process of choosing "friends" that not only regulates the influences suffered but also denotes the adoption of certain values and beliefs that can be protective, while no variable was mentioned among the juvenile offenders that could work as a protection.

For the "psychological development/behavior," the group comprising juvenile offenders stood out with regard to the number and nature of the indications. All adolescents in this particular group said to have a history of offences (not reported to court), which confirms their involvement with such practices, suggesting the consolidation of the problem. It should be emphasized that in the group of adjudicated adolescents, a reference to the use of alcohol and/or other drugs was made. Such behaviors, in addition to being high-risky and associated with specific factors, can also be understood as aspects that increase the probability of the individual to create new problems, such as their involvement with offenses. We must, however, observe that this problematic conduct (the use of alcohol and other drugs) do not appear in the midst of adolescents with good adaptation, because it was used as a selection criteria of the sample and generated the bias in the comparison. Future studies should focus on controlling this variable, when comparing the groups under study.

In addition, a larger number of juvenile offenders indicate a list of more diverse psychological aspects that can function as a risk factor to provoke such a delinquent behavior. However, it is worth mentioning that these aspects should be considered as risk factors and also be thought of as the result of a psychosocial development process taking place jointly with the chronic exposure to many other environmental factors.

In relation to the protective factors, personally, there was a balance between the groups. For the group with good social adaptation and the one comprising adjudicated adolescents, there were similar indications related to the ability to reflect before acting/planning the behavior in a conflict situation. Although these results are considered relevant, these indications refer to aspects of difficult evaluation i.e. to talk about it is different from the fact that presents these characteristics in actual situations.

Most of the adolescents was or is exposed to a number of risk factors, but what determines their behavior is the balance that exists between the number and the quality of risk and protection in the different domains¹⁴. It would be naive to think that only a single risk factor could cause problems. On one hand, there is evidence that the probability of an individual to develop behavior problems grows exponentially with the exposure to each risk factor, until it becomes extremely high. On the other hand, the absence of protective factors, as a counterpoint to the risks, is also a problem. Prevention interventions – both at the primary and secondary levels – should always target these two issues: reduce or eliminate risk factors as much as possible, and improve or introduce protective factors¹⁸.

In the domain "family", it is known that family cohesion is a key factor that contributes to soothe the effects of adversities¹⁹. Healthy family

relationships since birth serve as protective factor for life, but particularly for adolescents²⁰. The family presence and support can be effective in reducing the impact of the individual's exposure to stressful life events, because the link and the interactions serve as an emotional support and become the basis for the full development of the child and adolescent's potential²⁰.

Furthermore, the behavior patterns, the attitudes, as well as the conduct of the parents and siblings are important models for the adolescents and the establishment of rules and consistent discipline favors social behavior and academic performance^{21,22}.

In short, families who have consistent discipline and cohesion are more likely to have healthy members²³.

With regards to "school" and in the periods following childhood, the experiences gain great importance and become a source of influence on behavior, as the individual's participation in this setting becomes more and more active. Surely, the school has great influence in the development of personality, values and social relations²⁴. Especially in adolescence, the individuals broaden their interaction and activities, and the school environment starts playing an important role, which will affect their behavior in a sense that it could be adaptive or, on the other hand, inappropriate. This will depend on the quality of their relationships and the presence of affection and reciprocity that such environment is able to provide²³.

Thus, their participation in school activities can be understood as a protective factor when it offers positive relationships that promote self-esteem and self-efficacy²⁵. As it was mentioned before, to maintain a good relationship with the teachers is very important for the well-being of the individual in school; also with friends, or important people, who can be a safe reference to the individuals and make them feel wanted and loved. These are all considered important protective factors since they can promote a more suitable adaptation to the school setting.

To conclude, it is important to emphasize that on the basis of the results obtained, those adolescents with good social adaptation, as opposed to those involved with delinquency, seem to benefit from a larger number of protective factors, most notably in the domain "school", in which significant aspects are working as protection for the young people's social development. On the other hand, the two groups are similar with regard to the exposure to risk factors, in the different domains analyzed. Specifically in the domain "family", the difference refers to the indication, in the case of adolescents in conflict with the law, the family life being permeated by more conflicts, which tend to be solved through an aggressive behavior. In addition, it is noteworthy that the offenders reported (in childhood) that they were, and still are (in adolescence) disciplined through physical

punishment (which would indicate the existence of abuses throughout their development); while teenagers with good social adaptation would have been subjected to such disciplinary practices only in childhood (not during adolescence). Furthermore, in relation to being exposed to risk factors, it should be emphasized the fact that the juvenile offenders maintained a relationship with offensive adults (judged and convicted for criminal/illegal conduct), either within the family or with their peers, and this was not mentioned in the reports of adolescents with good social adaptation.

There has been a strong discussion towards the flaws involving the social institutions that should support and protect the youngsters. The performance of the basic institutions responsible for socialization, such as the family and the school are going through a serious crisis in the exercise of their social functions. However, according to Dryfoos²⁶, it must be recognized that the family and the school are privileged places for the implementation of preventive programs, with the first positively impacting early childhood and the second, influencing since the second childhood.

In other countries, some specific programs are being developed, mostly in schools, to prevent the development of risk behavior among the youngsters, with the introduction of specific content and consequent alteration in the school curriculum, the training of educators, counseling and volunteer work. These programs aim to provide intellectual stimulation, develop cognitive abilities and contribute with the academic success in the future. As the school is a place for educational training, it is a favorable context to promote a dialogue among individuals

of a certain group, and to the use of free time for personal interests, inhibiting the emergence of delinquency. Studies on the effectiveness of those programs show the consistency of the results of educational achievement on the prevention of delinquency²⁷.

Peer pressure has been another focus of intervention, whereas it seems to have a negative influence on adolescents' conduct. When such programs are carried out in schools, they intend to stimulate some adolescents to take a positive leading position by influencing others to change their behaviors²⁷.

Prevention strategies for youth violence are not a priority in Brazil. The concept of prevention in this area is still much dissociated from the actual proposals of the Brazilian institutions, perhaps due to the lack of knowledge of the factors that seem to effectively relate to this issue i.e. increase or decrease their occurrence.

The study reported here aims to contribute in that specific area. Future investigations should analyze the information obtained and investigate more systematically and fully a larger set of variables according to the literature. Besides, it is essential to extend the investigations to involve variables such as the community considering that the engagement of adolescents with offences is strongly associated with the characteristics of the place they live in¹⁴. Another limit to be overcome refers to the importance of obtaining data through other sources other than the adolescents themselves, as well as the need to use standardized instruments for gathering the information, particularly with regard to psychological development of the adolescents.

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