

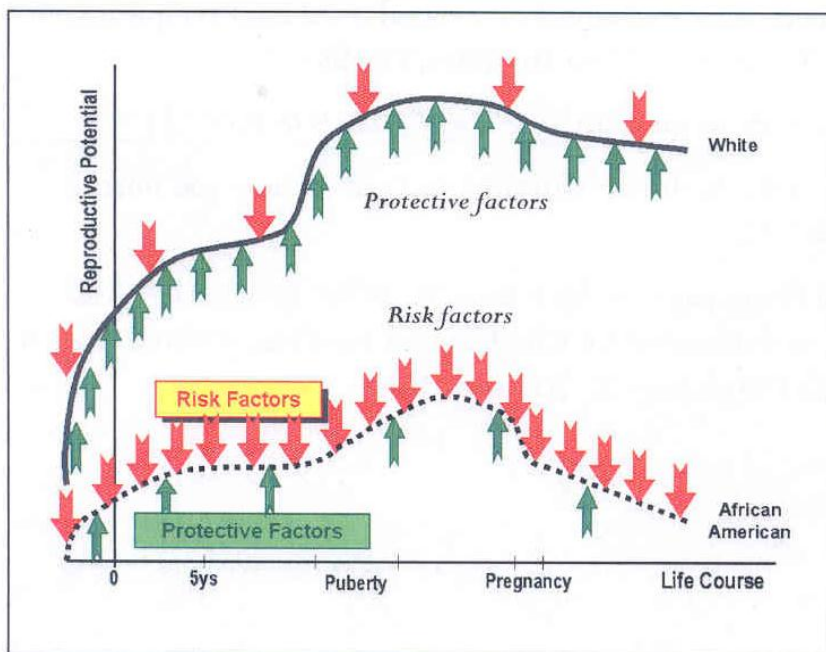
The Life Course Framework Fact Sheet

Adapted from the Life Course Initiative Fact Sheet: Contra Costa Health Services; and Rethinking MCH: The Life Course Model as an Organizing Framework: A. Fine, M. Kotelchuck

What is the Life Course Framework?

The Life Course Framework suggests that a complex interplay of biological, behavioral, psychological, and social protective and risk factors contributes to health outcomes across the span of a person's life. For example, disparities in birth outcomes, such as low birth weight and infant mortality, are often explained by the quality and frequency of prenatal care. In contrast, the Life Course Framework suggests that these disparities result from differences in protective and risk factors between groups of women over the course of their lives. As a result, the health and socioeconomic status of one generation directly affects the health status of the next one.

The Life Course Framework integrates a focus on critical periods and early life events with an emphasis on the wear and tear a person experiences over time. In the illustration below, differences in risk factors (downward arrows) and protective factors (upward arrows) over the life course affect health and development and contribute to disparities in birth outcomes for White and African American women.



Examples of Protective and Risk Factors

- Socioeconomic Status
- Race and racism
- Health care
- Disease status
- Stress
- Nutrition
- Weight status
- Birth weight
- Various health behaviors

What are the key concepts of the Life Course Framework?

- **Timeline:** *Today's experiences and exposures influence tomorrow's health.*
- **Timing:** *Health pathways are particularly affected during critical or sensitive periods.*
The preconception, pregnancy and early childhood life stages are critical periods with life-long impacts on health.
- **Environment:** *The broader community environment strongly affects the capacity to be healthy.*
Environment is broadly defined to include not only physical factors such as safe housing, availability of nutritious foods, and a medical home with coordinated services, but also social and economic factors such as racism and the poverty status of families and communities.
- **Equity:** *Inequality in health reflects more than genetics and personal choice.* Disparities in the life circumstances of population groups lead to disparities in health.
- **Protective and Risk Factors:** *The interplay of risk and protective factors influence health.*
Exposure to protective and risk factors occur throughout the life course (Timeline), have a significant impact on health if they occur during critical or sensitive periods (Timing), and occur within the context of the broader community environment (Environment). Differential exposures to risk and protective factors contribute to disparities in health outcomes.

What are the implications of the Life Course Framework?

- Understanding the Life Course Framework creates opportunities to build upon protective factors and reduce risk factors.
- The framework guides public health programs and interventions to focus on building environments that support healthy and equitable communities, and ensuring that the broad array of protective and risk factors are addressed in an integrated, coordinated, and comprehensive manner.