



Developmental Assets

Notes

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School Value Statements

Resources

The Search Institute is an independent, nonprofit, nonsectarian organization whose mission is to advance the well-being of adolescents and children by generating knowledge and promoting its application. To accomplish this mission, the Institute convenes organizational and community leaders, and works with state and national organizations. At the heart of the institute's work is the framework of 40 developmental assets. It offers the main source of materials and support for implementing the developmental assets program, 700 S. Third St., Suite 210, Minneapolis, MN 55415; 800-888-7828; www.search-institute.org

Scales, P., Leffert, N., Lerner, R., & Leffert, N. (1999). *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*, Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute. [Numerous other materials are also available from the Search Institute.]

Texas Youth Commission- The Prevention Connection, Connecting Research with Practice, A Research Newsletter of the TYC Office of Prevention, Fall, 2002, "What are protective factors?" <http://www.tyc.state.tx.us/prevention/newsletter.html>

Numerous examples of state or school district implementation of Developmental Assets can be found at: <http://www.ctassets.org/aaa/statenetworks.cfm#Nebraska>. One example is: **Eugene School District 4J** at http://www.4j.lane.edu/prevention/dev_assets.html.

Researchers as well as practitioners working in adolescent health often make a mistake when thinking about young people. That mistake is addressing specific parts of their lives or specific problems, without paying attention to the whole person. For example, some people believe that if we could just get kids to not use drugs or not drop out of school the rest would just take care of itself. Recently, we have begun to understand that the various problems happening to young people are related to each other and have to do with young people making poor choices related to their behavior. It is more important than ever to provide young people with the awareness and skills necessary to become safe, responsible citizens in today's society, and to look at the overall person. "Developmental Assets" provides young people and care givers a mechanism to do this.

What are Developmental Assets?

In an effort to identify the elements of a strength-based approach to healthy development, the Search Institute developed the framework of "Developmental Assets". This framework identifies forty critical factors for young people's growth and development. When drawn together, the assets offer a set of benchmarks for positive child and adolescent development. The assets clearly show important roles that families, schools, congregations, neighborhoods, youth organizations, and others in communities play in shaping young people's lives (Search Institute website, 2003).

The first twenty developmental assets, the "External Assets," focus on positive experiences that young people receive from the people and institutions in their lives. These twenty assets are grouped in four categories of external assets:

- **Support.** Young people need to experience support, care, and love from their families, neighbors, and many others. They need organizations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments.
- **Empowerment.** Young people need to be valued by their community and have opportunities to contribute to others. For this to occur, they must be safe and feel secure.
- **Boundaries and Expectations.** Young people need to know what is expected of them and whether activities and behaviors are "in bounds" and "out of bounds."
- **Constructive use of time.** Young people need constructive, enriching opportunities for growth through creative activities, youth programs, congregational involvement, and quality time at home.

A community's responsibility for its young does not end with the provision of external assets. There needs to be a similar commitment to nurturing the internal qualities that guide choices and create a sense of centeredness, purpose, and focus. Indeed, shaping internal dispositions that encourage wise, responsible, and compassionate judgments is particularly important in a society that prizes individualism. An additional twenty developmental assets are grouped into four categories of "Internal Assets":

- **Commitment to learning.** Young people need to develop a lifelong commitment to education and learning.
- **Positive values.** Youth need to develop strong values that guide their choices.
- **Social competencies.** Young people need skills and competencies that equip

them to make positive choices, to build relationships, and to succeed in life.

- **Positive identity.** Young people need a strong sense of their own power, purpose, worth, and promise.

In this program, schools are provided materials for assessing the assets of their students, as well as materials to teach or improve the availability of the external assets within a school or community. These assets can be used as a common language for describing methods of supporting students' needs, and assisting them to use the assets productively.

What We Know About Developmental Assets?

According to the Search Institute, research has shown the power of developmental assets. The more assets young people possess, the fewer risk behaviors they engage in. Even more important, the more assets they possess, the more young people experience positive outcomes such as school success, maintaining physical health, and helping others (Scales, 1999).

In 1998, the Search Institute completed a comprehensive synthesis of the research on adolescent development, looking at more than 800 studies and hundreds of other publications as related to each of the forty developmental assets (Search Institute website, 2003). A few of the top conclusions were:

- The asset framework is solidly supported by the research. Programs and policies based on the assets clearly are on firm research ground.
- Some categories of assets, and some individual assets have a stronger research base than others. According to the report, the research is large and confirming of the importance of *support, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, and commitment to learning*, and somewhat less, for *positive identity*. For the remaining asset categories, either the empirical research is more limited (the case for *empowerment* and *positive values*), or measurement is not adequate to capture all of the elements of the asset category (the case for *social competencies* as well as *positive values*).
- Context and individual differences matter. The assets are important for all youth, and there is surprising similarity across youth in which assets best predict various outcomes. But, levels and patterns of assets that “work” for different youth vary. For example, a sense of one’s personal power contributes meaningfully to school success among Native American, African American, and Latino youth, but not so much among Asian American, White, or multiracial youth.

- Assets are also relevant for younger children. Child development literature shows that the conceptual basis of developmental assets is sound: all children need their caregivers to surround them with support, as well as set boundaries, keep them safe, and provide multiple, developmentally responsive opportunities for exploring their growing worlds (Scales, 1999).

While the Search Institute has gathered research that supports the underlying components and structure of “Developmental Assets,” no evaluative research could be identified which demonstrated the effectiveness of this program in preventing or reducing behavioral problems, either for individual students or for groups in schools, agencies or communities. In addition, no evaluation research was found which showed the influence of the program on improving individual assets. “Developmental Assets,” as with other character education programs, is typically implemented based on logic and perceived usefulness rather than scientifically established outcomes.

Making Developmental Assets Work

The Search Institute has made available to schools small grants to conduct asset assessments of their students. A variety of materials are available for educators or other child-care workers to incorporate instruction about the assets in their teaching and work with students. According to the Institute, the program would best be implemented on a school-wide, if not district-wide basis. Even better would be community wide implementation in all child caring agencies and programs including recreational programs, child-care programs, religious youth groups, and other youth related organizations.

Conclusion

The “Developmental Assets” program, although not supported by specific evaluative research, is based on underlying concepts that have research or theoretical support. The “Assets” represent positive protective factors that can affect outcomes for students, and may support appropriate behavior. As such, it is one possible approach schools can take to understand and support positive student behavior, and to assist schools or communities to support children and youth.

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References

- Scales, P. C. (1999). Reducing risks and building developmental assets: Essential actions for promoting adolescent health. *Journal of School Health, 69*, 113-119
- Search Institute Website, 2003. www.search-institute.org

About the Safe and Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, is dedicated to developing prevention-based approaches to school safety, discipline reform and behavior improvement in schools.

Websites: <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/> or <http://www.unl.edu/srs/> Or Contact:

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