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Mobilizing Communities to Promote Developmental Assets:  
A Promising Strategy for the Prevention of High Risk Behaviors

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One of the characteristics of contemporary society capturing public attention is the frequency of health-compromising choices among American youth. Joy Dryfoos (1990), in her pioneering work *Adolescents at Risk*, concludes that half of all 10-17 year olds are at high or moderate risk for undermining their chances for health because of substance use, unsafe sex and/or teenage pregnancy, school failure and delinquency, crime, or violence.

An important reanalysis of data from the National Survey of Children extends this conclusion. This federally funded project studied children ages 7 to 11 in 1976 with reinterviews in 1981 and 1987. Researchers found that, before age 18, 68 percent of American boys and 55 percent of American girls had taken a serious developmental “misstep,” defined as using illegal drugs, running away from home, engaging in voluntary premarital sex, having a child premaritally, or dropping out of high school (Moore & Gleib, 1995). This percentage has likely increased since the original study, which took place between 1978 and 1987.

A more recent portrait of the attitudes and behaviors of America’s youth is provided by Search Institute’s ongoing study of 12- to 18-year olds. Since 1989, Search Institute has conducted in-depth studies of 6th- to 12th-grade students in public school districts across the country.

Aggregating responses from the 460 school districts that assessed all or most students in the 6th- to 12th-grade span and that conducted either a full census or a random sampling of students, yields a sample of 254,634 students (most surveyed between 1992 and 1995) with diversity in geography, race-ethnicity, and community size. It represents one of the largest efforts ever undertaken to measure the life experience of America’s youth (Benson, 1997).

This study suggests even higher levels of risk-taking behaviors than were identified in the National Survey of Children. Figure 1 shows the percentage of youth in each grade from 6 to 12 that engages in one or more of nine patterns of high risk behavior. These patterns are defined as follows:

- three or more uses of alcohol in the previous month or drinking to the point of intoxication one or more times in the past two weeks;
- daily cigarette use;

- three or more uses of an illegal drug (e.g., marijuana, cocaine, LSD) in the past year;
- sexual intercourse three or more times;
- three or more acts of antisocial behavior (such as vandalism or shoplifting) in the past year;
- three or more acts of violence in the past year;
- reported frequent depression or attempted suicide; and
- repeated absenteeism from school.

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In this large national sample, 64 percent of all youth evidence one or more of these nine patterns. And, as we would expect, this percentage increases from grade 6 (46%) to grade 12 (81%). Rates for risk patterns increase with age, except for violence and anti-social behavior, which stabilize after grade 8. Some other key findings include:

- Boys demonstrate higher pattern rates than girls in eight of the nine areas. The exception is the category of depression/attempted suicide.
- On the average, youth average nearly two (1.8) of these patterns. Sixth graders, on the average, are engaged in one pattern of risk taking. The average rises to 2.6 for high school seniors.
- Sixty-eight percent of boys engage in at least one of the patterns compared to 61 percent of girls.

These data signal that risk-taking is a widespread phenomenon, knowing no gender, grade, or race boundaries. Though there is variability, of course, the key point is that risk-taking has become somewhat normative in American society.

Compared with other technologically advanced nations, the United States has the dubious distinction of being a leader in several areas, including teenage pregnancy, adolescent alcohol, and

other drug use, and school dropout (Goetting, 1994). And this country also struggles to be competitive in international comparisons of student achievement. For example, 13-year-olds in the United States fall behind in both science and mathematics achievement when compared to same-age peers in Canada, France, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Korea, Switzerland, and Taiwan (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).

Additional comparisons are particularly sobering. Compared to other affluent nations, the United States has a proportionately high rate of children in poverty (21.5 percent of all children in 1991). Furthermore, poor children in the United States are worse off economically than poor children in other affluent nations. Conversely, affluent children in the United States are considerably better off than affluent children in other nations (Rainwater & Smeeding, 1995). In part due to these poverty trends, U. S. rates for infant mortality and low birthweight infants are among the highest in comparison with other affluent nations (Goetting, 1994).

### The Cultural Context

It would require volumes of interdisciplinary scholarship to document how a society reaches this point. Certainly, there is a complex pattern of economic, political, and social factors involved. In what ratio and with what interplay is unclear. As scholars and policymakers continue to address these issues, due consideration needs to be given to core developmental processes crucial for healthy child and adolescent development. Evidence is mounting that such processes may be unraveling. Four of these are discussed here.

#### Rupture in Family Support

The institution of family is undergoing radical transformation. Three trends of immense importance include the dramatic rise in single-parent families; the comparatively high rate, by international standards, of divorce and separation; and the persistence of out-of-wedlock births. These interlocking trends conspire to interfere with the kinds of attachment, support, and nurture instrumental for healthy psychosocial developments if for no other reason than the quantity of on-task parenting time one parent or guardian can give in comparison to two.

At the same time, however, there are other trends which interfere with on-task parenting, regardless of family composition. One is the way the sphere of work increasingly captures parent/guardian time and focus. The escalating rates for married mothers in the workforce is one important demographic trend. Increases in labor force participation are also documented for single mothers and single fathers (Benson, 1994).

It is not easy to capture what these demographic trends precisely mean for the delivery of on-task parenting. Some families, regardless of composition or the demands of work, still find ways to directly or indirectly (e.g., through accessing other supports such as day-care in extended family) provide crucial and positive developmental environments. Nevertheless, economic and social trends do interfere with this capacity. As one indicator, we note that recent national surveys show that 60 percent of 12-18 year olds report spending two hours or more per day at home without an adult presence. For sixth grade students, the rate is 53 percent, climbing to 61 percent of twelve grade students (Benson, 1997).

### Rupture in Community Support

A symbol of our contemporary difficulty in raising healthy youth is the widespread and growing belief that families, and families alone, are accountable. This is a radical departure from the way it has been, when parents were understood to be “representatives of the larger social order,” sharing “child-rearing responsibilities with other agents of society” (Furstenburg, 1993).

What is clear is a retreat of citizens from taking a kind of natural and daily responsibility for nurturing the youth in one’s midst. Some of this retreat from shared responsibility may be fueled by a generalized civic disengagement documented in both numerous public opinion polls and in downward trends in voting behavior and related indices of engagement (Putnam, 1996).

It is easy to think of community support programmatically, in terms of clubs, teams, organizations, and places to be. Indeed, such programmatic areas of community life are crucial. But perhaps more importantly, community support ought to be present in natural and constantly-occurring relationships, in which adults choose to “be there” for youth as advocates, affirmers,

role models, boundary-setters, values transmitters, encouragers, and elders in the routine and daily dynamics of neighborhoods, congregations, and public places.

These forms of daily support are waning, and this may be attributable to a number of factors. First and foremost is the spread of age segregation. The architecture and design of communities and neighborhoods isolates families. Further, the public perception of danger and the rise of social mistrust freezes connectedness within communities. One effect of this trend is the disengagement from the lives of children and adolescents.

This trend is exacerbated by two important dynamics. One is the current American proclivity to name, count, and report problems. Any adult who pays attention to the media is swayed with reports (e.g., alcohol use, teen pregnancy, youth violence) on the demise of childhood. This repeated experience overwhelms and freezes and inadvertently communicates that the problems are too vast and complex for an average citizen to touch. A related dynamic fueling disengagement from the lives of children is what McKnight (1995) calls the professionalization of care.

These two dynamics lull us into the naive belief (and hope) that doing better is a matter of introducing more programs and hiring more professionals, usually at public expense. Reclaiming positive community-based socialization hinges on quite the opposite: the resurrection of relational engagement with children and adolescents.

#### The Loss of Socialization Consistency

In order to pass on a coherent and constructive world view to children and adolescents, primary socializing systems (family, school, youth organizations, neighborhoods, religious institutions) need to provide some semblance of consistency in message. If we want to nurture the value of environmental responsibility, for example, our success is enhanced when youth are exposed to multiple places symbolizing, articulating, and modeling this core value.

Consistency used to happen more naturally, without much dialogue or rehearsal. And that's because people with similar beliefs lived together in clans, tribes, and small towns. Sometimes, such common beliefs were dysfunctional as is the case of a shared intolerance for

difference. Even here, though, the principle of consistency “worked”: a community of people bound together in this belief was successful in passing intolerance on to the next generation.

Consistency matters for transmitting the best of a culture, like responsibility, compassion, integrity, and justice. The growing heterogeneity of communities and the mass media expose youth to many ways of thinking and choosing, some of which are inconsistent. And it must be developmentally confusing, particularly when family, peers, media, and school are rarely united.

Where now are the consistent voices on things that matter? Such consistency needs to be intentionally reclaimed. It is my hypothesis that in all communities, all people—regardless of income, political persuasion, religious ideology, or race—share some common core of what is defined as good. Subgroups, families, and individuals may have additional perspectives that add richness beyond this common core. But the common core must be named through a process of safe community dialogue. Then it becomes a matter of broad and deep intentionality to articulate and model and symbolize these shared commitment in all places of interaction with youth. To do otherwise—via silence or inconsistency—invites confusion and risks soft commitment to the best of this culture. Some important work on reclaiming consistent messages at the community level is now occurring (Damon, 1997).

Take, for example, the value of caring. We would expect that if the people of even the most diverse communities were polled, there would be a shared commitment that compassion for others is a personal and social good. Yet, in all probability, communities give mixed signals, and in some cases, may give counter-productive cues (e.g., compassion is feminine, not masculine).

If compassion matters as a cherished youth outcome, then compassion must be modeled, articulated, rewarded, encouraged, and expected for youth as well as adults. It becomes part of a community’s normative structure with informal and programmatic opportunity for caring in family, neighborhood, youth organizations, schools, and religious institutions.

Few experience this consistency in American communities. Some families pursue it by choosing parochial schools that match family and/or parish world views. Some reduce the amount of inconsistency by proactively monitoring television viewing to reduce exposure to violence or

unbridled consumerism. Home schooling may also be an effort to reduce the inconsistency. The capacity is there in community life, however, to increase socialization consistency for all children. It will take work, including public dialogue about the common core, but it is there for the taking.

### The Modern Creation of Disconnection

The three dynamics discussed so far require reweaving the tattered web of community life. Another dynamic that interferes with healthy development is dealt with not by rediscovering what has been lost, but by seeking a solution to a modern invention. This invention is the period between childhood and adulthood. It includes what we now call adolescence.

Until fairly recent times, societies moved young children into the adult roles of work and parenting. After the Middle Ages, when literacy became an important competency, schooling became useful, first for some, then for all. Prior to this time, 10-18 year olds had assigned roles not much different than those held by adults.

It's dramatically different now. It might be argued that 10-18 year olds have to navigate through a long period of ambiguity in which modern society provides few if any rites of passage marking the transition out of childhood and offers few if any roles that give adolescents a stake in community life. Recent Search Institute research suggests that only a third of middle school and high school students think that their community provides useful roles for youth (Benson, 1996).

### Reweaving the Developmental Infrastructure

These four processes are among some of those that conspire to erode core elements of human development essential for both deterring health-compromising behaviors (e.g., alcohol and other drug use, violence, premature sexual activity) and promoting forms of psychosocial thriving (e.g., school success, affirming diversity). There, are of course, additional dynamics which contribute to this developmental malaise—from counterproductive social norms (Damon, 1995) to widespread public suspicion about children and adolescents.

Search Institute, a non-profit research and education organization in Minneapolis, has launched a comprehensive, research-based, community change effort designed to catalyze focused

attention on strengthening core developmental processes known to be crucial for inhibiting high-risk behavior and promoting thriving behavior. This effort has been described in a number of publications (Benson, 1993, 1994, 1997; Leffert, Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1997; Blyth & Leffert, 1995; Scales, 1997).

This effort integrates three intersecting models. The first is a conceptual framework defining the territory of what we have named developmental assets, a taxonomy of 40 developmental strengths, capacities, and experiences, each of which is known to have predictive and/or causal utility in deterring risk behaviors and promoting thriving. The second is a framework for describing the dynamics and processes within geographic or association communities which build these assets among children and adolescents. And the third is an emerging set of strategies for moving cities in the direction of actualizing the vision of asset-building community. The first of these models, developmental assets, has been refined through intensive scientific work, including in-depth surveys of middle school and high school students in over 700 urban, suburban, and rural communities. The other two models—the nature of asset building communities and strategies for community change—are works in progress, integrating theory, field research, and evaluation in an ongoing research effort to expand and refine the vision and change strategies. This work is guided by an inter-disciplinary community and social change work team at Search Institute. This team's work is informed by the ongoing efforts of 260 communities nationwide which have launched or are in the process of launching asset-building initiatives, a subset of pilot communities studied more intensively, five-year longitudinal studies in Minnesota and Colorado designed to track changes in developmental assets and the strategies which account for these changes, forums involving experts in social and community change, and the synthesis of a wide variety of literatures (e.g., community development, organizational and systems change, social movements). The following sections provide an overview of this comprehensive action research agenda, beginning with the framework of developmental assets.

### The Concept of Developmental Assets

The taxonomy of forty developmental assets draws together into a comprehensive model core elements of positive human development which integrate learnings from a number of fields. The assets, for both heuristic and community mobilization reasons, are grouped into eight categories: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, structured time use, educational commitment, values, social competencies, and positive identity.

Each of the developmental assets has scientific grounding in one or more of three literatures predicting positive youth outcomes. These are the fields of prevention (with a particular focus on developmental factors which suppress substance use, adolescent pregnancy, and violence), school success, and resiliency. Several publications describe the scientific foundations of the developmental asset framework (Benson, 1997; Leffert & Scales, in press).

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The assets are grouped into two major types: External assets are developmental opportunities, resources, and experiences provided by a community's socializing systems. Internal assets involve the internal strengths, competencies, commitments, and values which are known to have either protective or resiliency influence. They are grouped into categories of educational commitment, values, social competencies, and positive identity.

The 40 assets represent a common core of developmental building blocks crucial for all youth in contemporary American society, regardless of town size, region of the country, gender, economic situation, or race/ethnicity. One intent of this framework is to provide a language system which can unify socializing systems, including families, schools, youth organizations, and religious institutions. Such unity in a language of the common good is conceptualized as an essential factor in both mobilizing socializing energy in a community and in increasing the probability of socialization of consistency.

Since 1989, Search Institute has conducted in-depth studies of the prevalence of the developmental assets among public school students in thirty-five states. A 160-item anonymous survey, employing rigorous social science measurement techniques is administered in classrooms to 6th-12th grade students. Usually, this represents a complete census of all students in a school district. The survey instrument measures each of the developmental assets as well as a number of other constructs, including developmental deficits and at-risk behavior.

For each school district report, precautions are taken to eliminate students whose response patterns indicate an intent to exaggerate or distort answers (e.g., in each location, about two percent of respondents report frequent experience with a drug called Alawan, which is a fictitious substance). These students are eliminated from each school district profile.

Aggregating across the 213 school districts administering the survey in the 1996-97 school year ( $N=99,342$ ), we find that the average number of the 40 assets is 18.0. Another particularly striking finding is the apparent universality of asset depletion. Across all communities studied, the average number of the 40 assets occurs in a fairly narrow range, from about 16 to 20. As shown in the next section, multiple forms of high risk behavior are significantly repressed among students experiencing more than thirty of the developmental assets. However, relatively few students meet or exceed this benchmark. In this 1996-97 sample, we find that eight percent of middle school and high school students reach this level.

Girls (19.5) tend to average about three more assets than boys (16.5). Family income matters some, but by itself is insufficient to explain the number of developmental assets a young person has. In Minneapolis, we looked at how the developmental assets vary as a function of the city's eleven planning districts—which differ graphically in average family income, property values, and resources. Across these 11 geographical areas of the city, the average number of 40 assets ranges from 16.7 to 20.1 (Benson, 1996). Not surprisingly, as average wealth rises, assets rise. But putting this in context, note that the difference is only about three developmental assets when comparing the least and most affluent planning districts.

The 40 developmental assets are dramatically related to health-related behaviors. The evidence is consistently strong that the influence of the assets is cumulative. The general rule is that more is better.

In school district studies we also measure 21 forms of risk-taking in the areas of alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, other drug use, sexual activity, anti-social behavior, violence, school absenteeism, alcohol use and driving, gambling, and attempted suicide.

Using Minneapolis public school data as a typical example, the average student reports 5.1 of these 21 behaviors (Benson, 1996a). But the key point is how participation in risk behaviors is reduced when developmental assets increase. For those students possessing 10 or fewer of the 40 assets, the average number of the 21 risk behaviors is 10.0. The average falls to 6.6 for students with 11-20 assets, to 3.7 for those with 21-30, and 1.4 for those with 31-40 assets. This dramatic pattern holds for boys, girls, and youth in each racial-ethnic category (African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, Caucasian). As assets increase, the incidence of all high-risk behaviors decreases.

Assets protect young people from involvement in individual acts of risky behaviors, which for some may be isolated incidents or experimentation. Each of 21 risk-taking behaviors declines as assets increase. For example, the rate for alcohol use at least once in the past month declines from 55 percent among youth having 0 to 10 assets to 9 percent of youth having 31 to 40 assets. Physically hurting someone (once or more in the past year) decreases from 40 percent to 4 percent. The 40 assets, then, constitute important protective factors for many forms of risk taking.

In addition, assets are also powerful inoculators against patterns of high-risk behavior. For example, 35 percent of Minneapolis youth with 0 to 10 assets smoke cigarettes daily or use chewing tobacco frequently. The rate falls with each increase in the level of assets, ultimately falling to 2 percent of youth with 31 to 40 assets. Rates for three or more acts of violence in the past year fall from 69 percent of youth with 0 to 10 assets to 10 percent of youth with 31 to 40 assets. In short, the more assets a young person has—regardless of gender, grade, or race-

ethnicity—the less likely he or she is to engage in these patterns of risky behaviors. Such patterns, as illustrated in Table 2, are found in each of our school district studies.

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Developmental assets also appear to promote positive outcomes. As assets increase, so do school grades, the affirmation of diversity, educational aspirations, and prosocial behavior. Thus, it is clear that increasing young people’s experiences of assets not only has the potential for reducing harm, it also has the potential for increasing thriving outcomes

The data in this section have provided a kind of descriptive overview of the strong association of the forty developmental assets to behavior. A series of scientific papers will be produced in 1998 which address the factor structure of the forty asset framework, the psychometric properties of the asset measures, and the predictive utility of the asset framework utilizing more advance analytical techniques.

### Mobilizing Communities

Developmental assets represent a critical set of environmental conditions (external assets) and psychological traits and capacities (internal assets). They appear to have additive or cumulative utility for both preventing high risk behavior and enhancing indicators of thriving. The issue here has to do with understanding the interlocking strategies needed to make the experience of these assets more normative. Drawing on literatures within child and adolescent psychology—with particular reference to socialization theory—our conceptual model of change begins with several core tenets. One is that developmental assets are promoted by socialization consistency, a topic addressed earlier. This concept requires that many socializing systems (e.g., family, school, youth organizations, religious institutions, neighborhoods) promote a common core of developmental targets (e.g., support, boundaries, social competencies). A second principle has to do with civic

engagement and the potential contribution of informal, non-programmatic influences such as deep and lasting intergenerational relationships and symbols and rituals which convey to children and adolescents a kind of vibrant and constant affirmation. A third tenet focuses on the principle of asset accumulation and suggests that socialization energy within communities should be intentionally targeted to ensure consistent and redundant exposure to all or most developmental assets. This principle is more important than it might seem. Although it appears obvious, it serves as something of an antidote to the national search for a single panacea or “magic bullet.” A prime example here is the frequent call for raising self-esteem. This is, of course, a developmental asset, but like others in the asset paradigm, it is only part of the formula for healthy development.

Finally, principles of both depth and breadth are germane to building developmental assets. Depth refers to repeated or redundant experience. The value of family support for example is enhanced by its frequency and quality. Similarly, the positive development consequences of neighborhood caring are enhanced when it is experienced long-term with the participation of multiple actors. Breadth has more to do with the reach or scope of planned change within a community and signals, based on the research discussed earlier, that most children and adolescents within a community lack many of the developmental assets. And by extension, then, the target for building developmental assets is the universe of children and adolescents within a community.

Unleashing these kinds of socialization processes ultimately requires a multi-sector, citizen-engaged, long-term initiative designed to mobilize residents, organizations, systems, and sectors to take action around a shared understanding of and shared commitment to a common core of developmental targets. In 1996, Search Institute launched a national initiative called Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth to assist communities in the process of mobilizing citizens and systems around the developmental asset paradigm. This effort includes resources, training and consulting systems, networking conferences, and an extensive research and evaluation system, including longitudinal studies in three cities and more qualitative inquiries of the 260 cities now included in the national initiative. These efforts are supported by a number of partners, including the national corporate sponsorship of Lutheran Brotherhood, the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest

Fund, the W. K. Kellogg and Annie E. Casey Foundations, and an expanding number of regional and community foundations. A new research effort, undergirded by the W. K. Kellogg and Annie E. Casey Foundations, is aimed at understanding how to reach and engage urban families disconnected from traditional support and dissemination systems

In 1997, Search Institute began the first statewide initiative under the banner of Assets for Colorado Youth. Supported by a five and one-half year partnership with The Colorado Trust, this effort seeks to integrate a number of strategies, including a long-term public education campaign, micro-grants to 12 communities, training and consulting systems, and evaluation procedures intended to track changes in developmental assets and adult norms.

Since 1994, 260 cities have begun or are beginning the planning process) intentional community-wide initiatives to unleash long-term citizen and system commitment and action, using the developmental assets paradigm to both unify community sectors around a shared vision and empower individual citizens and all socializing systems. These cities include urban centers like Seattle, Albuquerque, and Orlando, as well as suburbs and rural communities.

The community change process we advocate emphasizes high levels of grassroots engagement, cross-sector leadership, and sustained attention to public awareness and civic engagement. The models of change and our evolving and expanding evaluation systems are grounded in the traditions of social movements, community empowerment, and capacity-building. This rapidly expanding arena of inquiry and action involves a number of elements, including planned change models and a long-term focus on studying the dynamics of multiple asset-building initiatives to inform best practices for planning, launching, and sustaining initiatives and to pinpoint replicable dynamics which alter the actions of citizens and socializing systems. This evaluation plan is in the process of design and implementation, and will include in-depth inquiry in six pilot communities, augmented by the longitudinal inquiries launched during 1998 in the Colorado initiative.

A set of targets recommended to Healthy Community • Healthy Youth initiatives in Seattle, Albuquerque, and Minneapolis captures some of our current understanding of key strategies

needed to unite communities and unleash the kind of movement which triggers asset-building action by individual citizens and socializing systems. What follows are a series of recommendations included in widely-distributed reports to the citizens and their civic leaders in these three urban centers (Benson, 1996a; 1996b; Benson *et al.*, 1997).

### Mobilize the public

A priority should be placed on communicating the developmental assets and their power to all residents. Such mobilization should be along-term strategy with the goal of reaching all citizens—including children and youth—on multiple occasions, using a variety of media, with the asset-building paradigm.

The goals of this mobilizations are to release an exponential increase in daily support for youth through caring, sustained relationships; promote intergenerational contact; enhance the frequency with which adults articulate and model responsible values and boundaries; remind parents and guardians of the importance of staying “on task”; advance the child-centeredness of all institutions, organizations, neighborhoods, and public places; and increases public support for quality schools, co-curricular activities, after-school care, pre-school care, mentoring programs, and other initiatives designed to build developmental strength.

Innovative approaches are needed to galvanize public interest and prompt individual interest and corporate action. Neighborhood meetings, community rallies and celebrations, parent meetings at schools, newsletters, brochures, and posters, forums and workshops in schools and religious institutions, conversations among friends, media coverage, public service announcements, a speaker’s bureau, dramatic presentations, and many other approaches all have potential as communication strategies.

In addition to highlighting the importance of asset building and the power of each individual to build assets, communication strategies should provide ideas of concrete ways for people to build assets in their every-day lives. Other strategies to motivate action may include highlighting individual actions on behalf of youth and celebrity spokespeople advocating for a community-wide responsibility for youth.

Think intergenerationally

In all communities, people have become too comfortable with disconnected generations. People, places, and programs that connect old and young, adults and youth, teenagers and children should be named and held up for others to celebrate and emulate.

Expand the reach of family education

Families are a powerful source of developmental assets. All parents and guardians—regardless of income or life circumstances—need multiple opportunities to learn, remember, and act on developmental assets. Agencies, schools, community education, religious institutions, the media, public health, and other community-based organizations should work together in delivering this efforts, with particular emphasis on promoting responsible fathering.

Support, publicize, and expand current asset-building efforts

Though they may not use the same vocabulary, many people, places, and programs in a city already promote positive youth development. They are spread throughout a community—in neighborhoods, schools, parks and recreation programs, religious institutions, and youth organizations. Recognizing, publicizing, and affirming these efforts, and the professionals and volunteers who work on behalf of positive development, helps to reinforce their commitment and inspires others to take similar action. Networking among programs can increase their sense of purpose, increase their effectiveness, and ensure that services are not unnecessarily duplicative.

Strengthen socializing systems

Though much asset-building occurs daily, informal interactions with children, neighborhoods, schools, religious institutions, youth organizations, and employers must also become more intentional and purposeful about how they articulate, enhance, and expand their asset-building potential. Systems of training, technical assistance, and networking should be made available.

Empower youth to contribute

Most youth perceive that they are devalued by adults. And most report that their community does not provide useful roles in which child and adolescent energy can be

constructively channeled. It should become normative in all settings where youth are involved to seek their input and advice, to make decisions with them, and to treat them as responsible, competent allies in all asset-building efforts.

#### Deepen exposure to cultural strengths and traditions

For many youth, there is considerable strength in the traditions, symbols, and values of their cultural heritage. Particularly for youth of color, this heritage includes the concept of elders, the primacy of intergenerational relationships, respect for figures of authority, the value of caring for others, and a wisdom about what matters. Being in touch with and affirming these strengths represents an important dimension of cultural competence, in addition to knowledge and contact with cultures beyond one's own.

While an asset in its own right, the embrace of heritage can enhance self-concept, positive values, and a sense of belonging. Programs and people that help to deepen these roots should be supported and expanded. It is also crucial that we provide ways for youth who view themselves as bi-racial or multi-racial to claim cultural strengths.

#### Elevate the importance of service

It ought to become the norm for children and youth to engage in acts of caring and compassion of others and for the common good through youth organizations, families, neighborhoods, schools, and religious institutions. Service to others both solidifies caring values and provides opportunities for building the assets of social competencies, empowerment, and positive identity. When combined with intentional reflection, it becomes a powerful tool for shaping learning, positive values, and competencies. A goal is to ensure that all youth engage in acts of service many times a year from ages 5-20.

#### Provide places to grow

Too many youth are divorced from the kinds of teams, clubs, organizations, and programs that provide safe and active places to develop asset strength. All citizens and their leaders need to rally around the expansion of opportunities, and parents and all adults must encourage and reward involvement.

### Begin public dialogue

It is a formidable task to build public consensus on a common core of shared values and boundaries. Nevertheless, a way must be found to pursue this essential dialogue. While cultural, religious, and political diversity adds richness to these discussions, there is also a set of values and boundaries around which a city and its people can unite.

Beginning this process on blocks and in apartment buildings, in congregations and community centers, and in other grassroots settings not only leads to broader understanding in the city as a whole, but it also begins to create relationships and connections at the personal level.

### Envision and organize

Reclaiming developmental assets for all youth requires a long-term movement of will and action by citizens, organizations, and systems. Keeping the movement alive will depend on networks of people who serve as ambassadors for the language of assets and who provide encouragement and resources.

These “vision teams” should be rooted in each neighborhood in the city. In many cases, the best procedure is to draw the challenge of asset building into pre-existing collaborations and/or neighborhood organizations, providing resources to encourage and sustain indigenous leadership, expand the impact of existing asset-building strategies, and build consistency in asset development across neighborhoods, families, schools, youth organizations, and religious institutions.

At the same time, a city-wide “vision team” of children, teenagers, parents, neighbors, committed citizens, and the leaders of all major socializing systems (schools, religious institutions, youth organizations) can help keep the vision alive and coordinated throughout the city, ensuring that neighborhoods, organizations, and individuals are networked together and equipped to carry out the work in their own area in a way that contributes to the overall vision for an asset-rich city.

As the title of this article suggests, the developmental assets paradigm and the mobilization of communities around this model represent a promising approach for enhancing the well-being of American children and adolescents. Critical scientific and conceptual issues remain and frame ongoing inquiry by both Search Institute staff and university and research center colleagues. Among

issues deserving deep and sustained inquiry are the definition and refinement of the territory of developmental assets, the generalizability of the paradigm, the determinants of developmental assets within each of multiple sectors (e.g., families, schools, youth organizations, neighborhoods, religious institutions), the degree to which intentional community change strategies can alter developmental asset profiles, the impact of community-level variables (e.g., size, diversity, economics, region) on the change process, and the sustainability of change. What is ultimately emerging is a multi-disciplinary line of inquiry which looks at the intersection of community and child and adolescent development. And a major part of the inquiry is learning from and with many cities initiating what might be construed as naturalistic social experiments in unleashing their developmental capacity.

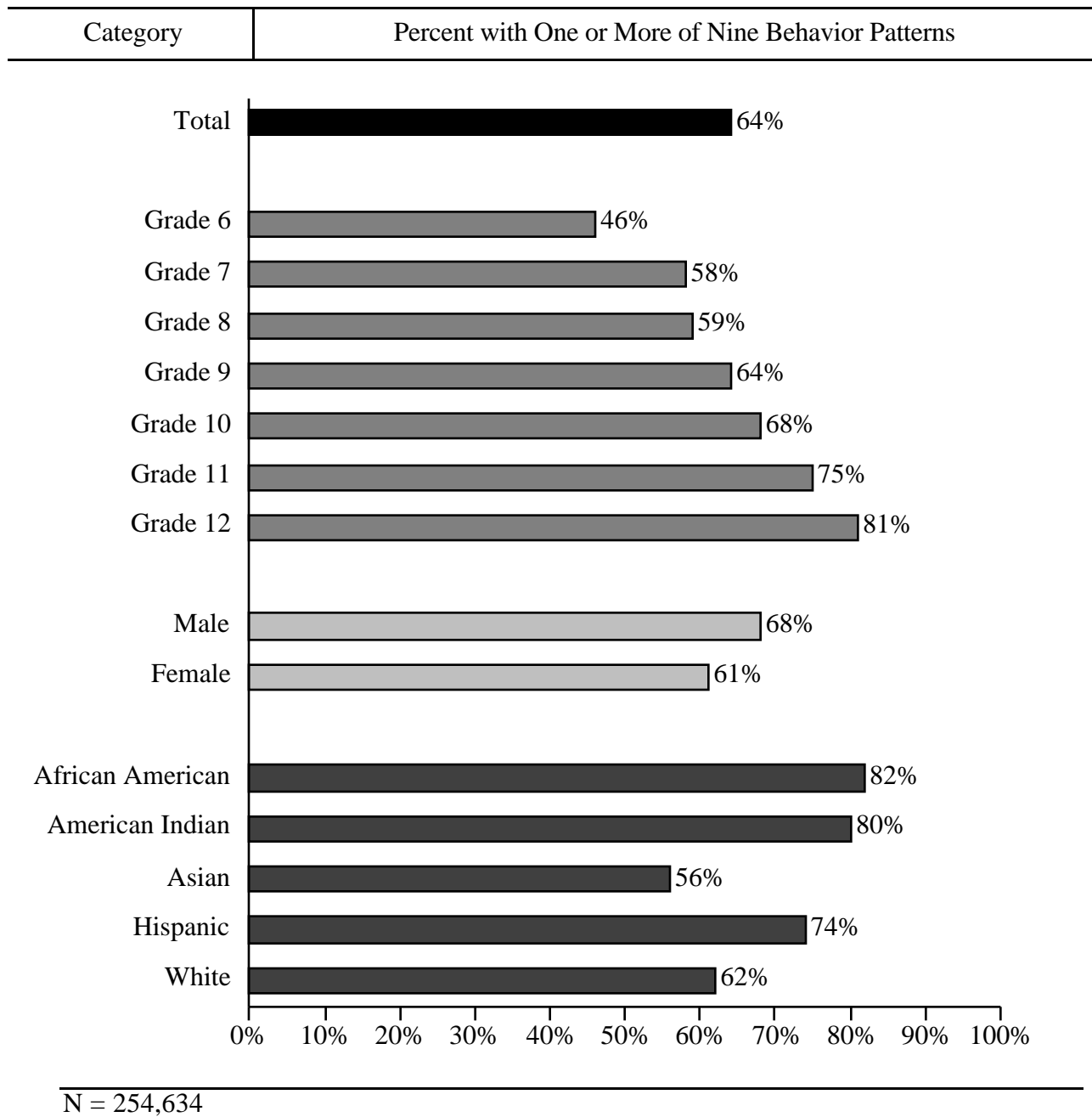


Figure 1. Percent of Youth Engaging in One or More High-Risk Behavior Patterns

Table 1

40 Developmental Assets

<u>External</u>	<u>Support</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Family support</u>—Family life provides high levels of love and support</li> <li>2. <u>Positive family communication</u>—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek parent(s) advice and counsel.</li> <li>3. <u>Other adult relationships</u>—Young person receives support from three or more non-parent adults.</li> <li>4. <u>Caring neighborhood</u>—Young person experiences caring neighbors.</li> <li>5. <u>Caring school climate</u>—School provides a caring, encouraging environment.</li> <li>6. <u>Parent involvement in schooling</u>—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.</li> </ol>
	<u>Empowerment</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. <u>Community values youth</u>—Young person perceives that community adults value youth.</li> <li>8. <u>Youth as resources</u>—Young people are given useful roles in the community.</li> <li>9. <u>Service to others</u>—Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.</li> <li>10. <u>Safety</u>—Young person feels safe in home, school and the neighborhood</li> </ol>
	<u>Boundaries and Expectations</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. <u>Family boundaries</u>—Family has clear rules and consequences; and monitors the young person’s whereabouts.</li> <li>12. <u>School boundaries</u>—School provides clear rules and consequences.</li> <li>13. <u>Neighborhood boundaries</u>—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people’s behavior.</li> <li>14. <u>Adult role models</u>—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.</li> <li>15. <u>Positive peer influence</u>—Young person’s best friends model positive, responsible behavior.</li> <li>16. <u>High expectations</u>—Both parents and teachers encourage the young person to do well.</li> </ol>
	<u>Constructive Use of Time</u>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17. <u>Creative activities</u>—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.</li> <li>18. <u>Youth programs</u>—Young person spends three hours or more per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.</li> <li>19. <u>Religious community</u>—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.</li> <li>20. <u>Time at home</u>—Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.</li> </ol>

<u>Internal</u>	<u>Commitment to Learning</u>	<p>21. <u>Achievement motivation</u>—Young person is motivated to do well in school.</p> <p>22. <u>School engagement</u>—Young person is actively engaged in learning</p> <p>23. <u>Homework</u>—Young person reports one or more hours of homework every school day.</p> <p>24. <u>Bonding to school</u>—Young person cares about his or her school.</p> <p>25. <u>Reading for pleasure</u>—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.</p>
	<u>Positive Values</u>	<p>26. <u>Caring</u>—Young person places high value on helping other people.</p> <p>27. <u>Equality and social justice</u>—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.</p> <p>28. <u>Integrity</u>—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs</p> <p>29. <u>Honesty</u>—Young person tells the truth even when it is not easy.</p> <p>30. <u>Responsibility</u>—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.</p> <p>31. <u>Restraint</u>—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs</p>
	<u>Social Competencies</u>	<p>32. <u>Planning and decision-making</u>—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.</p> <p>33. <u>Interpersonal competence</u>—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.</p> <p>34. <u>Cultural competence</u>—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.</p> <p>35. <u>Resistance skills</u>—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.</p> <p>36. <u>Peaceful conflict resolution</u>—Young person seeks to resolve conflict non-violently.</p>
	<u>Positive Identity</u>	<p>37. <u>Personal power</u>—Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”</p> <p>38. <u>Self-esteem</u>—Young person reports having high self-esteem.</p> <p>39. <u>Sense of purpose</u>—Young person reports “my life has a purpose.”</p> <p>40. <u>Positive view of personal future</u>—Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.</p>

Table 2

Developmental Assets and High Risk Behavior Patterns

Patterns of High-Risk Behaviors		Percent of Youth Engaged in High-Risk Behavior Patterns			
Category	Definition	If 0-10 Assets	If 11-20 Assets	If 21-30 Assets	If 31-40 Assets
<u>Alcohol</u>	Has used alcohol three or more times in past month or got drunk once or more in past two weeks	63	42	24	12
<u>Tobacco</u>	Smokes one or more cigarettes every day or uses chewing tobacco frequently	35	18	7	2
<u>Illicit Drugs</u>	Used illicit drugs three or more times in the past year*	49	30	12	2
<u>Sexuality</u>	Has had sexual intercourse, three or more times, lifetime	44	32	17	4
<u>Depression/Suicide</u>	Is frequently depressed and/or has attempted suicide	44	33	20	7
<u>Anti-Social Behavior</u>	Has been involved in three or more acts of shop-lifting, trouble with police, or vandalism in the past year	53	32	11	2
<u>Violence</u>	Has engaged in three or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, carrying or using a weapon in the last year, or threatening physical harm in the past year	69	49	31	10
<u>School Failure</u>	Has skipped school two or more days in the past month and/or has below a C average	55	34	15	7
<u>Driving and Alcohol</u>	Has driven after drinking or ridden with a drinking driver three or more times in the past year driving	30	19	9	3
<u>Gambling</u>	Has gambled three or more times in the past year	42	28	17	9

\*Includes marijuana, LSD, PCP or angel dust, amphetamines, cocaine, or heroin.

Based on seventh-, eighth-, 10th-, and 11th-grade students in Minneapolis Public Schools; N = 5,235; data from 1995-96 school year.

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