

## **Building Developmental Assets:** A New Strategy for Preventing High-risk Behavior

By: Peter L. Benson  
Search Institute  
Minneapolis

**D**evelopmental assets refer to a wide range of positive experiences, resources, competencies and supports which help to inoculate youth from engaging in risk taking behavior. This research-based taxonomy of 40 “building blocks” of human development is based on a synthesis of decades of research in child and adolescent psychology and the more applied literatures of prevention and protective factors. This research synthesis focused on integrating development experiences which are known to promote three types of healthy outcomes: a) the **prevention** of alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, violence and school dropout; b) the enhancement of **thriving** outcomes (e.g., school success, the affirmation of diversity); and c) **resiliency**, or the capacity to rebound in the face of adversity.

Research on the 40 developmental assets conducted by Search Institute in hundreds of urban, suburban, and rural communities across the United States repeatedly documents four important findings:

*Peter L. Benson, Ph.D. is president of Search Institute, a nonprofit research organization with headquarters in Minneapolis. This article is based on a keynote address delivered on May 7, 1997 at the Ohio State University conference, Risky Behaviors of Adolescents: Integrating Research, Practice, and Policy.*

➤ The 40 developmental assets are additive or cumulative. That is, the more assets a young person possesses, the stronger his or her health outcomes. In the case of alcohol and other drug use, the relationship is particularly profound. For example, among 12- to 18-year-old students across America who possess only 10 or fewer of the assets, 53 percent report using alcohol “three or more times in the last month” and/or binge drinking “ounce or more in the last two weeks.” For those youth with 11-20 assets, the rate falls to 30 percent. When 21-30 assets are present, the rate falls to 11 percent. And for those youth who are asset rich (that is, evidencing 31 or more of the assets), the percent falls to three. Similar relationships are founded with tobacco use, marijuana use, and other substances.

➤ Combining asset profiles from hundreds of communities we find that public school students ages 12-18 average only 18.0 of the 40 assets.

➤ Somewhat surprising is that youth in small towns, with populations of 5,000 or less, do not have more assets on average than do youth in large cities like Seattle, Portland, or Minneapolis.

➤ Boys average only 16.5 assets, compared with 19.5 for girls.



The critical issue, then, is how to build developmental assets in children and adolescents as a strategy complementary to risk reduction and the use of traditional prevention programs. Five sources of asset-building potential hypothesized to exist within all communities, each of which can be marshaled via a multiplicity of community mobilization strategies. These sources of potential asset-building influence include:

1) sustained relationships with adults, both within and beyond family; 2) peer group influence (when peers choose to activate their asset-building capacity); 3) socializing systems; 4) community-level social norms, ceremony, ritual, policy and resource allocation; and 5) programs, including school-based and community-based efforts to nurture and build skills and competencies.

In brief, asset-building communities are distinguished as relational and intergenerational places, with a critical mass of socializing institutions (e.g., families, schools, neighborhoods, youth organizations, religious communities) choosing to attend to the developmental needs of all children and adolescents. Developmental assets become a language of the common good, uniting sectors, citizens, and policy in the pursuit of shared targets for all children and adolescents. The commitment of a community and its people, institutions, and organizations is both long-term and inclusive.

Ultimately, rebuilding and strengthening the developmental infrastructure in a community is conceived less as a program implemented and managed by professionals and more the mobilization of public will and capacity. A major target for this level of community engagement is the creation of a normative culture in which all residents are expected by virtue of their membership in the community to promote the positive development of children and adolescents.

Since 1995, more than 500 American cities have begun the process of mobilizing citizens, families, schools, neighborhoods, congregations, employers and youth organizations to unleash their capacity for asset building. A number of studies are underway to document the impact of these multi-sector and citizen-engaged initiatives on the health and well-being of children and adolescents. Part of the theoretical underpinnings for this work is the hypothesis that risk behaviors like alcohol and other drug use are reduced the most when communities simultaneously focus on risk reduction, prevention programming and asset building.

The following resources provide more detailed information on developmental assets and asset-building communities:

Benson, P. L., Galbraith, J. & Espeland, P. (1996). *What kids need to succeed*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Press.

Benson, P. L., (1997). *All kids are our kids: What communities must do to raise caring and responsible children and adolescents*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., Scales, P. C., and Blyth, D. A. (1998). Beyond the "village" rhetoric: Creating healthy communities for children and adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science*, 2, 138-159.

Leffert, N., Benson, P. L., Scales, P.C., Sharma, A. R., Drake, D. R., & Blyth, D. A. (1998). Developmental assets: Measurement and prediction of risk behaviors of risk behaviors among adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science*, 2, 209-230.

Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Leffert, N., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (1999). *A fragile foundation: The state of developmental assets among American youth*. Minneapolis: Search Institute.