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# DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS AND THE PROMOTION OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT: FINDINGS FROM SEARCH INSTITUTE DATA

The healthy development of youth is a value and a goal of American society. Families, schools, and communities are charged with nurturing, socializing, and educating children to be competent, happy, positively contributing members of society. However, the theory and research traditions associated with psychology—developmental psychology in particular—have historically been framed within a deficit perspective regarding youth.

G. Stanley Hall (1904) initiated this deficit perspective with his description of adolescence as a time of inevitable storm and stress. Similarly, Anna Freud viewed adolescence as a period of developmental disturbance, and Erik Erikson believed that youth identity was born of crisis. Under the influence of the deficit perspective, much of the research and theory about youth development has emphasized a medical model that focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of problems. In addition, the data collected on youth and the media's portrayal of youth have often stressed problems, risk behavior, and challenges. In response, interventions and programs for adolescents have often focused on specific problems or disorders. However, this approach detracts from viewing youth holistically, and as possessing hopes, purpose, and skills, as well as problems and challenges. Moreover, viewing youth as the target of

change overlooks the importance of the multiple contexts youth inhabit. These contexts also have strengths that can be engaged to promote healthy development and recovery from adversity.

Research in the 1980s and 1990s began to focus on the study of *positive youth development* (PYD). This approach emphasizes the potential in every individual for positive, healthy growth across the life span, regardless of socioeconomic situation, past negative experience,

portive resources, opportunities, and experiences, leading to healthy development and thriving.

The PYD approach views adolescence as a period of the life cycle with unique opportunities for developing assets and putting young people on a positive developmental path. Youth are viewed as eager to explore the world and build competencies (Damon, 2004). From this perspective, youth who have experienced mental health issues need not only treatment, but also growth-promoting, challenging activities that help develop their identities, skills, and interpersonal relationships. Of course, developmental challenges and adversities do exist; however, they do not define the adolescent and determine all treatment and interactions.



## Impact of Developmental Assets

Benson and colleagues (1998) at the Search Institute have proposed a framework of 40 developmental assets, with 20 internal assets (unique to the individual), and 20 external assets (available in youths' families, schools, and neighborhoods) that promote healthy growth among young people. Benson et al., believe that when these external assets (e.g., support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time) are integrated over time for youth with internal assets (e.g., commitment to learning, posi-

or clinical diagnoses. Instead of trying to fix problems, the PYD approach considers ways to develop individuals *and* social contexts through strengths-based policies and programs and through the empowerment of youth and families. Research derived from this perspective seeks to align children, families, and communities with growth-sup-

**Table 1: Fourteen Developmental Asset Scales**

| Developmental Assets            | Definition   |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Individual Asset Scales</b>  |  |
| Social Conscience               | Being committed to equality, social justice, and helping to make the world a better place  |
| Personal Values                 | Committing to values such as honesty, responsibility, and integrity  |
| Interpersonal Values and Skills | Caring about other people's feelings, demonstrating empathy, and being a good friend   |
| Risk Avoidance                  | Making good choices when confronted with risky situations (e.g., "Being able to say no when someone wants me to do something that I know is wrong or dangerous") |
| Activity Participation          | After-school involvement in clubs, organizations, sports, and lessons  |
| Positive Identity               | A sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy   |
| School Engagement               | Being prepared for school by completing homework and bringing books and materials to class   |
| <b>Ecological Asset Scales</b>  |  |
| Connection to Family            | Interactions with family members include support, communication, and love  |
| Adult Mentors                   | Having relationships with caring adults whom one looks forward to spending time with   |
| Connection to Community         | Being part of a community that values what youth have to say   |
| Parent Involvement              | Parents are active participants in schooling—attending events, asking about homework, and encouraging youth to do their best                                     |
| Connection to School            | Having caring teachers, receiving encouragement, and caring about the school one goes to   |
| Rules and Boundaries            | Experiencing appropriate and fair boundaries at home, at school, and in the neighborhood   |
| Contextual Safety               | Perceiving that one's family, school, and neighborhood are safe and free from danger   |

tive values, social competencies, and positive identity), then mutually beneficial individual youth ⇔ community context relations are created, providing young people with the resources needed to build and to pursue healthy lives. The model attempts to describe what

is universal and good for all youth. However, it is important to note that developmental assets may have different meaning, value, and impact for diverse youth, families, and communities.

Data from the Search Institute (Benson et al., 1998; Leffert et al.,

1998; Scales et al., 2000) regarding the impact of assets suggests there is an additive or cumulative effect of the total number of assets on positive outcomes. Using a sample of more than 200,000 youth in grades 6 to 12 from across the United States, the findings indicate that the more assets a young person reports experiencing, the more likely he or she is to report engaging in thriving behaviors (e.g., helping others or school success) and the less likely they are to report engaging in high-risk behaviors (e.g., delinquency or substance abuse). These relationships are consistent for youth of all socioeconomic strata and racial/ethnic groups. However, the absolute number of developmental assets and thriving risk behaviors do differ among groups, demonstrating the different needs and experiences of youth in the United States.

The Search Institute data also indicate that youth report only having about half or less of the 40 total assets (average = 18) and the total number of assets tends to be lower for high school youth as compared to middle school youth. Some assets show steeper differences than others and may represent contrasting developmental needs of youth in different grades. In addition, boys generally report having fewer assets than girls. This difference may arise from the reporting approach or may reflect different socialization practices and expectations.

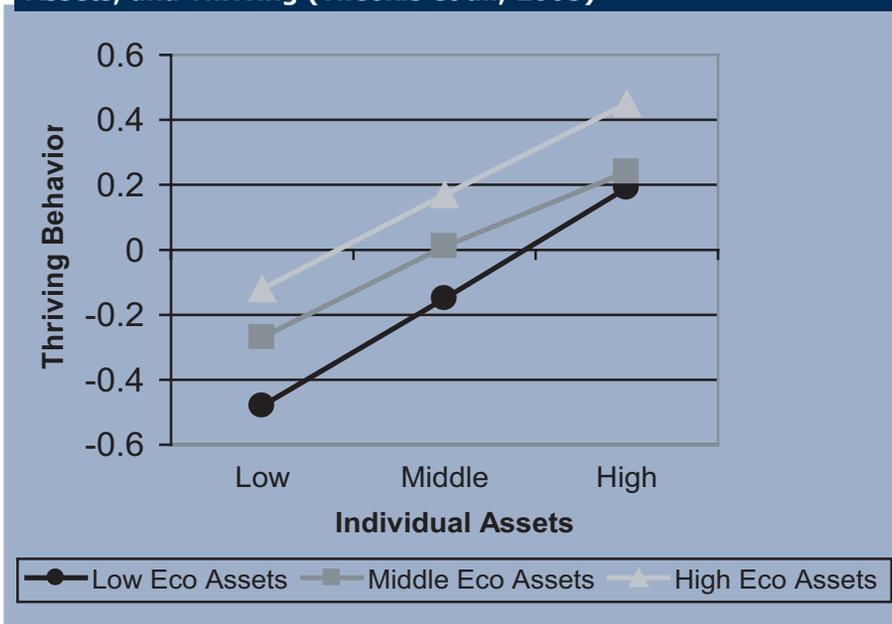
The cumulative power of developmental assets for the promotion of thriving behaviors and reduction of risk behaviors is consistent with the PYD vision of how to strengthen the capacities of youth. However, it is also important to understand the unique contributions of specific assets for diverse youth. Youth after-school activity engagement (e.g., involvement in school activities, sports, or community clubs) was the most consistent predictor of positive outcomes for youth of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, when socioeconomic status, gender, and grade were controlled for in statisti-

cal analyses. These activities are hypothesized to include skill-building activities with adult mentors, which are believed to meet youths' developmental needs for competence and positive social bonds. This finding coincides with Eccles and Gootman's (2002) emphasis on the growing importance of community programs as an asset for youth, given America's changing social structure (e.g., more single-parent households) and the increasing education and training needs of youth in our progressively more complex and technological world.

Planning and decision-making skills, as well as self-esteem, were also strong predictors of many positive outcomes for diverse youth. In addition, for youth of color, family variables (e.g., provision of support) and community variables (e.g., presence of adult mentors) were significant contributors to thriving. Future research must continue to describe which attributes, of which youth, in relation to what contextual settings, promote thriving.

It is important to note that the 40 assets do not work in isolation, and that there are strong relationships among assets due to the unique cultural niches of youth. For example, school engagement by youth occurs in relation to a caring school climate and high expectations by teachers. To explore the nature of the interrelation among developmental assets, we did a re-analysis of the Search Institute developmental assets data. Theokas et al. (2005) found that the 40 developmental assets could be reduced to 14 asset scales. These scales could be grouped into two categories of seven scales each, representing individual and ecological assets, respectively (see Table 1). Each of these scales combines several assets from the original 40-asset framework,

**Figure 1: Relationship between Individual Assets, Ecological Assets, and Thriving (Theokis et al., 2005)**



and each scale represents a major category of influence for youth development. Higher scores on each individual scale are related to higher thriving scores.

Moreover, both individual and ecological assets contribute to thriving behaviors. As can be seen in Figure 1, having high assets in either domain increases the likelihood of youth thriving and having high assets in both domains predicts the highest levels of thriving.

### Building Opportunities for Thriving

The PYD approach and the construct of developmental assets associated with it are intended to replace the traditional problem-focused paradigm about adolescent development and to help communities and practitioners plan and organize different programs and policies to benefit youth and families. The asset concept orients individuals towards what is good and possible across development. This emphasis reduces the likelihood of stigmatizing youth who have experienced adversity—including mental health challenges. It also provides new avenues for fostering resilience and re-

covery by identifying many ways to mobilize developmental assets, not just of the individual and family, but also of the community.

The PYD approach and the assets concept use community as an organizing principle. Community ties together multiple, intersecting individuals, relationships, and institutions. Interventions that are confined to a setting (e.g., school reform) or to a problem (e.g., juvenile delinquency) are missing out on multiple opportunities to engender positive change. Multiple, positive social influences throughout an individual's life are needed to maximize motivation, learning, and healthy growth.

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