

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS FRAMEWORK TO POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

The framework of developmental assets posits a theoretically-based and research-grounded set of opportunities, experiences, and supports that are related to promoting school success, reducing risk behaviors, and increasing socially-valued outcomes including prosocial behavior, leadership, and resilience. A considerable body of literature on developmental assets has emerged in the last two decades, informing research and practice in education, social work, youth development, counseling, prevention, and community psychology. In addition to synthesizing this literature, this chapter

discusses: the recent development of the Developmental Asset Profile, an instrument designed, in part, to assess change-over-time; the utilization of asset measures in international research; the expansion of the assets framework to early childhood and young adults; and new research using latent class analysis (LCA) to identify classes or subgroups of youth.

I. Introduction

The framework of developmental assets, first posited in 1990 (Benson, 1990) and refined in 1995 (Benson, 1997, 2006), was explicitly designed to provide greater attention to the positive developmental nutrients that young people need for successful development, not simply to avoid high-risk behaviors, and to accent the role that community plays in adolescent well-being. As described in a series of publications (Benson, 2002, 2003; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Leffert et al., 1998; Scales & Leffert, 1999, 2004; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000), the framework establishes a set of developmental experiences and supports hypothesized to have import for all young people during the second decade of life. Recent work is taking a broader lifespan perspective, positing that developmental assets reflect developmental processes that have age-related parallels in infancy, childhood, and young adulthood (Leffert, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 1997; Mannes, Benson, Kretzmann, & Norris, 2003; Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, in press; Scales, Sesma, & Bolstrom, 2004a; VanderVen, 2008). This work will be addressed later in this chapter.

The framework synthesizes research in a number of fields with the goal of selecting for inclusion those developmental nutrients that (a) have been demonstrated to prevent high-risk behavior (e.g., substance use, violence, dropping out of school), enhance thriving, or strengthen resilience; (b) have evidence of generalizability across social location; (c) contribute balance to the overall framework (i.e., of ecological- and individual-level factors); (d) are within the capacity of communities to effect their acquisition; and (e) are within the capacity of youth to proactively procure (Benson & Scales, in press; Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006).

Because the developmental assets framework for adolescents ages 12–18 was designed not only to inform theory and research but also to have practical significance for the mobilization of communities, the 40 assets included in the model (Benson et al., 2006) are placed in categories that have conceptual integrity and can be described easily to the residents of a community. As seen in Table I, the assets are grouped into 20 external assets (i.e., environmental, contextual, and relational features of

Table I
The Framework of 40 Developmental Assets® for Adolescents

Search Institute has identified the following building blocks of healthy development that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.

External Assets

Support

1. *Family support*—Family life provides high levels of love and support.
2. *Positive family communication*—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parent(s).
3. *Other adult relationships*—Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
4. *Caring neighborhood*—Young person experiences caring neighbors.
5. *Caring school climate*—School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
6. *Parent involvement in schooling*—Parent(s) is actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.

Empowerment

7. *Community values youth*—Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
8. *Youth as resources*—Young people are given useful roles in the community.
9. *Service to others*—Young person serves in the community 1 h or more per week.
10. *Safety*—Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.

Boundaries and expectations

11. *Family boundaries*—Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
12. *School boundaries*—School provides clear rules and consequences.
13. *Neighborhood boundaries*—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
14. *Adult role models*—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
15. *Positive peer influence*—Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
16. *High expectations*—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

Constructive use of time

17. *Creative activities*—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
18. *Youth programs*—Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.
19. *Religious community*—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
20. *Time at home*—Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.

Internal Assets

Commitment to learning

21. *Achievement motivation*—Young person is motivated to do well in school.
22. *School engagement*—Young person is actively engaged in learning.
23. *Homework*—Young person reports doing at least 1 h of homework every school day.
24. *Bonding to school*—Young person cares about her or his school.
25. *Reading for pleasure*—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

(Continued)

Table I
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Positive values

- 26. *Caring*—Young person places high value on helping other people.
- 27. *Equality and social justice*—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
- 28. *Integrity*—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
- 29. *Honesty*—Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”
- 30. *Responsibility*—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
- 31. *Restraint*—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.

Social competencies

- 32. *Planning and decision making*—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
- 33. *Interpersonal competence*—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
- 34. *Cultural competence*—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- 35. *Resistance skills*—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
- 36. *Peaceful conflict resolution*—Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

Positive identity

- 37. *Personal Power*—Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”
 - 38. *Self-Esteem*—Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
 - 39. *Sense of Purpose*—Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”
 - 40. *Positive View of Personal Future*—Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.
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socializing systems) and 20 internal assets (i.e., skills, competencies, and values). The external assets comprise four categories: (a) support, (b) empowerment, (c) boundaries and expectations, and (d) constructive use of time. The internal assets are also placed into four categories: (a) commitment to learning, (b) positive values, (c) social competencies, and (d) positive identity. The scientific foundations for the eight categories and each of the 40 assets are described in more detail in [Scales and Leffert \(1999, 2004\)](#). An exploratory factor analysis conducted with 150,000 6th–12th grade students showed that 14 scales emerged for middle school students and 16 for high-school students, all conceptually reflecting the eight *a priori* asset categories; in addition, a second-order factor analyses identified two major superordinate scales, labeled individual assets and ecological assets, that mirrored the *a priori* designation of assets into internal and external classes ([Theokas et al., 2005](#)).

The developmental assets approach has become acknowledged as one of the most widespread and influential frameworks for understanding and strengthening positive youth development (PYD; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Small & Memmo, 2004). Google Scholar shows that the developmental assets approach and/or Search Institute have been referenced in more than 17,000 peer-reviewed journal articles and other academic/professional publications since 1999. In addition to the assets framework, some of the most well-known approaches to PYD include the social development model and Communities That Care (promulgated by the University of Washington's Social Development Research Group), the 5Cs of PYD, and the 5 Promises of the America's Promise Alliance. A search in December 2010 of three major citation sources, Google Scholar, Academic Search Premier, and Psycinfo, showed that citations of the developmental assets approach and/or Search Institute far outstripped all the others in the 5 years from 2005 to 2010, with developmental assets/Search Institute being named 12,567 times, the social development model/Communities That Care cited 2182 times, the 5 Promises named 149 times, and the 5Cs cited 97 times. Google Scholar does not distinguish peer-review mentions from others, but in the Academic Search Premier and Psycinfo listings, developmental assets/Search Institute had a total of 1618 citations, compared with the closest other PYD approach, the social development model/Communities That Care, with 324 peer-reviewed mentions.

In addition to its predominance in the literature, the developmental assets framework has become a central organizing feature of youth programming in major national systems, such as the Y (formerly the YMCA of the USA) and Y Canada, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Girl Scouts of the USA, the American Camp Association, the Salvation Army, major national religious denominations spanning the conservative to progressive spectrum, thousands of service-learning programs in schools, congregations, and youth organizations (through the National Youth Leadership Council and the support of the Corporation for National and Community Service), and more than 600 formal community coalitions trying to strengthen their communities as environments for young people, by focusing on initiatives for building the assets. In 2009 alone, more than 10,000 schools and youth programs were using Search Institute resources, and in the last 15 years, more than 20 million of the Institute's books and other resources have been disseminated worldwide. In the past decade, more than 300,000 leaders in education, health, social services, religion, youth development, and other fields have been trained in the assets framework, and more than 5 million people from over 180 countries have visited the Institute's Web site (www.search-institute.org). Scholars, educators, religious leaders, and youth work

practitioners in more than 60 countries across the globe are using the asset approach in programs and data collection.

The national and international spread of the research on and practice of developmental assets is rooted in five strategies, each of which has fueled interest and action in the framework. First, the extensive research on the asset framework has, as noted earlier, created considerable attention within a number of fields of inquiry, including developmental psychology, community psychology, education, social work, and clinical/counseling psychology. This multidisciplinary exposure not only has fueled research by scholars and graduate students but has also activated practitioners in these fields to apply the research in countless communities and programs. Second, a long-term effort at the diffusion of the developmental asset research and its implications has brought the work, via Search Institute's training, public speaking, consulting, media communications, and conferences, to scholars and practitioners in every state and multiple nations. Third, the asset framework names developmental nutrients that are—in the words of many practitioners—both practical and actionable. Accordingly, thousands of professionals and citizens bring the work to local agencies and communities as an approach that helps deepen the impact of a wide range of other initiatives, including mentoring, service learning, youth leadership development, after-school programming, and parent education. Fourth, the asset framework, with its broad ecological approach, empowers many sectors—family, school, neighborhood, after-school programs, faith communities—to take action. Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, the asset framework (as shown by the research that undergirds it) can be positioned in a city or state or nation as a set of nutrients that matters, developmentally and behaviorally, for all youth regardless of race, ethnicity, family composition, gender, parental education, or geographic location. Hence, the asset model has the potential to create the kind of shared vision that can lessen fractured and siloed approaches that inhibit cooperation and collaboration.

II. Developmental Assets: Overview of Research

The foundational appeal of the assets framework is that it is rooted in and anchored by a vast scientific literature in child and adolescent development. The assets framework was originally conceived in 1990, with a review of the prevention, youth program evaluation, and resilience literatures yielding an initial framework of 30 developmental assets arrayed across six broad developmental categories that seemed rather consistently to be linked to a variety of indicators of youth well-being