



Raising Happy, Successful Children

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

For years, psychologists have studied children. Specifically, they have looked at what factors are important in a child's emotional and intellectual development.

Some studies have researched multiple developmental factors while others have assessed the value of single specific factors, such as empathy or community involvement.

But during the past 45 years, researchers at Search Institute have focused on putting it all together. They reviewed many existing studies and did many of their own. Overall, they analyzed data involving 360,000 school kids.

Recently they published their findings identifying 40 "developmental assets." These assets are factors that children experience in their lives that help them do better overall, factors that help them grow up to be healthier, happier, and more successful.

The researchers divided these assets into two main categories, "external" and "internal." Here's a description of each:

External Assets

These include positive experiences that children receive from people and organizations that influence their lives. The 20 developmental assets in this category are divided into four sub-categories:

- **Support** – Growing up in a supportive environment has a positive effect. Children need to experience emotional and intellectual support from the people in their community. Specific assets include: 1) family support, 2) positive family communication, 3) positive relationships with other adults, 4) caring neighborhood, 5) caring school and out-of-home environment, 6) Parent involvement in schooling and out-of-home activities.
- **Empowerment** – Young people need to be valued and feel safe in their community. They also need to be invited to contribute something to their community. Assets include: 1) a community that values the children, 2) children are given useful roles, 3) children are encouraged to offer service to others, 4) safety.
- **Boundaries and expectations** – Young people need to know what behavior is in-bounds and what is out-of-bounds. In addition, they need to be encouraged to do their best. Assets include: 1) family boundaries, 2) school boundaries, 3) neighborhood boundaries, 4) positive adult role models, 5) positive peer influences, 6) high expectations on what each child can do.
- **Constructive use of time** – Children need positive, meaningful, and fun things to do. Also they need places to go where adults care about them. Assets available to children include: 1) creative activities, 2) school and out-of-home activities such as youth programs, 3) religious community, 4) positive, supervised time at home.

Internal Assets

These include experiences that nurture the inner qualities of children. The experiences vary from finding a sense of purpose to gaining the wisdom that helps children make responsible decisions in their lives. The 20 developmental assets in this category are divided into four sub-categories:

- **Commitment to learning** – Children benefit from developing a lifelong commitment to learning and education. Specific assets include: 1) achievement expectation and achievement motivation, 2) engagement in learning, 3) stimulating activity and homework, 4) enjoyment of learning and bonding to school, 5) reading for pleasure.

- Positive values – Young people need to develop positive internal values that guide their decisions in life. Assets to be developed include: 1) caring, 2) sense of equality and social justice, 3) integrity, 4) honesty, 5) responsibility, 6) healthy lifestyle and attitude toward sex.
- Social competencies – Young people need to acquire skills and attitudes that will help them make friends, get along with all types of people, and avoid risky situations. Assets include: 1) planning and decision making, 2) interpersonal skills, 3) cultural competence (becoming comfortable with people of different cultures), 4) resistance skills (ability to resist dangerous situations), 5) peaceful conflict resolution skills.
- Positive identity – Children need to have a sense of purpose. Also they need to feel that they're valuable or worthwhile and that they have personal abilities, talents, and promise. Assets include: 1) personal power (feelings of being in control), 2) self-esteem, 3) sense of purpose, 4) positive view of one's personal future.

The Value of Developmental Assets

The protective power of assets has been demonstrated in studies with more than 217,000 children in grades 6 to 12. As you might expect, the more assets children experienced in their lives, the less likely they were to engage in, or have problems with: alcohol abuse, violence, illicit drug use, sexual activity, depression, attempting suicide, antisocial behavior, and causing trouble in school.

On the other hand, the more assets young people had, the more likely they were to exhibit leadership, maintain good health, have diverse values, and succeed in school.

Research has shown that the average young person experiences only 19.3 of the 40 assets but an average of 31 assets or more was associated with having the strongest, positive influence on a child's life. Also girls have been shown to connect with assets a little better than boys. Girls, on average, have 20.7 assets while boys average 17.8.

After Search Institute published information on developmental assets in 2002, many community and educational organizations have used the information to evaluate needs in their communities, and to evaluate the effectiveness of community programs.

There's one thing for sure. It truly does take a community to raise a child.

With this research in hand, parents, educators and community leaders can make key decisions on behalf of young people. For more facts and resources about developmental assets, check online at www.search-institute.org

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