

Developmental Assets

Tier 1

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Traditionally, schools and researchers have often focused on a deficit model of working with a student; which means that they focused on what was wrong with students rather than focusing with what was right. An asset model focuses on what is right with a student and builds on these pre-existing assets and strengths (Rose, 2006). In an effort to identify the elements of a strength-based approach to healthy development, the Search Institute developed the framework of “Developmental Assets”. These were developed from a comprehensive synthesis of over 800 studies on “adolescent development, prevention, risk reduction, protective factors, and resilience” (Stevens & Wilkerson, 2010).

The researchers used a survey comprised of 156 items to measure 40 different developmental assets (Rose, 2006). This program is based on the Positive Youth Development Model, which is a strengths-based approach to working with students by viewing them as “at promise” rather than at risk (Stevens & Wilkerson, 2010). The 40 developmental assets offer a set of benchmarks for positive child and adolescent development. The assets highlight the important roles that families, schools, congregations, neighborhoods, youth organizations, and others in communities play in shaping young people’s lives (Search Institute website, 2003). According to Rose (2006), “The Search Institute provides a theoretically-driven, empirically-tested model that may guide child and youth care workers in formulating interventions that target these important developmental assets” (p. 237).

What are the Developmental Assets?

Developmental assets are a list of useful or valuable components or qualities of children and youth and their experiences. These are presumed to affect development through childhood. Developmental assets are organized into two categories, each including 20 of these developmental assets.

External Assets. The first 20 developmental assets, the “External Assets,” focus on positive experiences that adolescents receive from the people and institutions in their lives. Students who report having these assets “feel cared for and cared about” (Rose, 2006, p. 237). These 20 assets are grouped in four categories of external assets:

- **Support.** Young people need to experience support, care, and love from their families, neighbors, and many others. They need organizations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments. “Supported youth know they are not alone; they know they can rely on

positive, fulfilling relationships with numerous adults in their families, schools, and communities” (Scales & Leffert, 2004, pg. 23).

- **Empowerment.** Young people need to be valued by their community and have opportunities to contribute to others. For this to occur, they must feel safe and feel secure. Krueger, Galovits, Wilder, and Pick (1999) state that: *Students “feel empowered when they believe they have the ability to relate, discover, and make meaningful contributions. Empowerment. . . evolves from being engaged in activities and learning with others who believe that youth have within themselves the capacity to change and grow”* (p. 18).
- **Boundaries and Expectations.** Young people need to know what is expected of them and whether activities and behaviors are “in bounds” or “out of bounds.”
- **Constructive use of time.** Young people need constructive, enriching opportunities for growth through creative activities, youth programs, congregational involvement, and quality time at home. Research shows that using free time constructively “prevents involvement in risky behaviors, encourages the development of other positive attributes, and allows for the development of pro-social skills” (Rose, 2006, p. 238). Leisure is also important and can be considered a constructive use of time when done correctly. Leisure is defined as time used in an activity freely chosen and the student is intrinsically motivated to engage in it (Krueger et al., 1999). Research through the Search Institute has shown that engaging in leisure activities is important in “learning interpersonal skills, developing cognitive and physical abilities, and exploring identity issues (Rose, 2006, p. 238).

Internal Assets. A community’s responsibility for its youth does not end with the provision of external assets. There needs to be a similar commitment to nurturing the internal qualities that guide choices and create a sense of centeredness, purpose, and focus. Indeed, shaping internal dispositions that encourage wise, responsible, and compassionate judgments is particularly important in a society that prizes individualism. Individuals who possess these assets feel good about themselves and what they can do (Rose, 2006). An additional 20 developmental assets are grouped into four categories of “Internal Assets”:

- **Commitment to learning.** Young people need to develop a lifelong commitment to education and learning and to do this they need to feel motivated to learn and connected with their school. This category is defined as the “desire to learn new things, pleasure in doing so, and knowing how to go about learning new ideas or skills together constitute a commitment to learning that is keeper and more lifelong than simply pursuing success in school” (Scales & Leffert, 2004, p. 120).
- **Positive values.** Youth need to develop strong values that guide their choices. Some of the positive values that students reported were honesty, integrity, and responsibility. For these values to make the most significant impact on students they need to “become deep commitments that guide how



young people think and act” (Scales & Leffert, 2004, p. 149).

- Social competencies.** “Social competence involves the personal skills that children and adolescents use to deal with the many choices, challenges, and opportunities they face (Scales & Leffert, 2004, p. 173). These skills include ability to make friends and resolve conflict (Scales & Leffert, 2004), planning and decision making, awareness and acceptance of others, and to resist peer pressure (Rose, 2006).
- Positive identity.** Young people need a strong sense of their own power, purpose, worth, and promise. Students that have these assets report they feel there is a purpose to their lives, they have control and they are optimistic (Rose, 2006). This category is based off the concept of identity development, which is defined as “an integrated view of oneself encompassing self-concept, beliefs, capacities, roles, and personal history” (Scales & Leffert, 2004, p. 193).

External Assets	
Category	Specific Asset
Support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family Support 2. Positive Family Communication 3. Other Adult Relationships 4. Caring Neighborhood 5. Caring School Climate 6. Parent Involvement in Schooling
Empowerment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Community Values of Youth 8. Youth as a Resource 9. Service to Others 10. Safety
Boundaries and Expectations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Family Boundaries 12. School Boundaries 13. Neighborhood Boundaries 14. Adult Role Models 15. Positive Peer Influence 16. High Expectations
Constructive Use of Time	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. Creative Activities 18. Youth Programs 19. Religious Community 20. Time at Home
Internal Assets	
Category	Specific Asset
Commitment to Learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 21. Achievement Motivation 22. School Engagement 23. Homework 24. Bonding to School 25. Reading for Pleasure
Positive Values	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 26. Caring 27. Equality and Social Justice 28. Integrity 29. Honesty 30. Responsibility 31. Restraint
Social Competencies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 32. Planning and Decision Making 33. Interpersonal Competence 34. Cultural Competence 35. Resistance Skills 36. Peaceful Conflict Resolution
Positive Identity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 37. Personal Power 38. Self-esteem 39. Sense of Purpose 40. Positive View of Personal Future

How are developmental assets assessed in students?

Schools can assess the developmental assets in their students by administering the Search Institute’s survey, which can be located on their website (www.search-institute.org). Included in the Developmental Assets Profile package is access to the online survey, pre- and post-assessments for students participating in the program, a thorough user guide for planning the survey administration, and in-depth aggregate reports to help guide utilization of the school’s data. According to the Search Institute website, schools must first survey their students to determine which assets are priorities in their population. The school must also ensure that parental involvement is a high priority, and they are encouraged to hold a presentation or workshop to educate and motivate school and community leaders. Finally, schools



are encouraged to purchase activities and guides from the Search Institute’s website to help implement an asset-based approach in their schools. There is not a clear-cut intervention to implement with developmental assets, but knowing what assets the population encompasses and what assets are lacking, overall, can help school leaders to capitalize and improve on needed areas.

Which Students Could Benefit from a Developmental Assets Model?

In this program, schools are provided materials for assessing the assets of all of their students, as well as materials to teach or improve the availability of the external assets within a school or community. These assets can be used as a common language for describing methods of support for students’ needs, and assisting them to use the assets productively. Schools could possibly increase assets by maintaining a positive school climate and linking students’ developmental contexts, which would be their family, school, community, and peer groups (Stevens & Wilkerson, 2010).

In 1998, the Search Institute completed a comprehensive synthesis of the research on adolescent development, looking at more than 800 studies and hundreds of other publications as related to each of the forty developmental assets (Search Institute website, 2003). A few of the top conclusions were:

- **Context and individual differences matter.** The assets are important for all youth, and there is surprising similarity across youth in which assets best predict various outcomes. However, levels and patterns of assets that “work” for different youth vary. For example, a sense of one’s personal power contributes meaningfully to academic success among Native American, African American, and Latino youth, but not as significantly for Asian American, White, or multiracial youth.

- **Assets are also relevant for younger children.** Child development literature shows that the conceptual basis of developmental assets is sound: all children need their caregivers to surround them with support, as well as set boundaries, keep them safe, and provide multiple developmentally responsive opportunities for exploring their growing worlds (Scales, 1999).

What Do We Know About the Developmental Assets Program?

While the Search Institute has gathered research that supports the underlying components and structure of “Developmental Assets,” no evaluative research could be identified which demonstrated the effectiveness of this program in preventing or reducing behavioral problems, or in preventing student dropout either for individual students or for groups in schools, agencies, or communities. In addition, no evaluation research was found which showed the influence of the program on improving individual assets. “Developmental Assets,” as with other character education programs, is typically implemented based on logic and perceived usefulness rather than scientifically established outcomes (Edwards, Mumford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007).

Research Based on Developmental Assets. A research study of two million adolescents from the United States shows that the average number of assets reported by students in grades 6-12 is 18 out of 40, with boys reporting fewer assets than girls (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Stevens & Wilkerson, 2010). In another study the relationship between developmental assets and adolescents’ well-being was explored and it was discovered that there was a presence of healthy behaviors and an absence of problem behaviors in students who had higher levels of developmental assets and cultivated them (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000).

Studies of Developmental Assets have shown that students with more assets were less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as the use of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs (Atkins, Oman, Vesely, Aspy, & McLeroy, 2002; Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Sesma, 1999; Benson, Scales, Leffert, & Roehlkepartain, 1999; Oman et al., 2004; Scales, 1999; Scales et al., 2005); violence (Aspy et al., 2004; Scales, 1999); and antisocial behavior, depression, suicide, or school problems (Scales et al., 2005). In addition, students with more assets “reported more consistent school attendance, higher grade point averages” (Stevens & Wilkerson, 2010, p. 228), better physical health, were more likely to exhibit leadership skills, value diversity, delay gratification, and help others (Scales et al., 2005; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2003). The asset framework is solidly supported by the research.



Some categories of assets, and some individual assets have a stronger research base than others. According to Scales and Leffert (2004), the research confirms the importance of support, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, and commitment to learning, and somewhat less for positive identity. For the remaining asset categories, either the empirical research is more limited (the case for empowerment and positive values), or measurement is not adequate to capture all of the elements of the asset category (the case for social competencies as well as positive values).

Conclusions regarding research on Developmental Assets. Stevens and Wilkerson (2010) stated that although “the research on the Developmental Assets is promising, there are several significant limitations that exist. To date much of the research is correlational and based on convenience samples, self-reports, and inventory-style data” (p. 228). Additionally, much of the research to date has been conducted by the program developers at the Search Institute (Hamilton, 2002). Further controlled studies, particularly conducted by outside researchers and published in peer-reviewed journals, would

strengthen the claims made by the program developers. However, Stevens and Wilkerson (2010) assert that “Developmental Assets are a positive, proactive, and research-based approach” (p. 228). Rose (2006) concluded that the “asset-based approach is both relevant and useful in formulating interventions that target positive development for all children and youth” (p. 239-240). That would seem to imply that the assets are useful to target further intervention, but not an intervention in themselves. Stevens and Wilkerson (2010) suggest that the Developmental Assets are more useful if viewed as an empirically based framework for organizing interventions rather than as specific evidence-based interventions.

Implementing a Developmental Assets Program

The program has been adopted by a variety of community programs and agencies as well as by schools, and ideally would be adopted by all human services and education agencies across a community. According to the Institute, for schools the program would best be implemented on a school-wide, if not district-wide basis.

A variety of materials are available for educators or other child-care workers to incorporate instruction about the assets in their teaching and work with students. The Search Institute has made available small grants to schools in order to conduct asset assessments of their students as some materials may be costly. For example, the Developmental Asset Survey costs approximately \$150.00 for first time users and additional reports can be purchased for \$150.00 (The Search Institute, 2014).

While the Developmental Assets approach and materials provide a way to assess individuals and groups of students regarding these positive protective factors, the materials to date do little to suggest how these assets can be improved either as individual assets or as an overall group of assets. The methods to improve specific assets are not clearly identified. While the program is useful to highlight positive assets in students individually and as a group, it does not directly indicate how these assets can be improved, or how they should be prioritized. As such, they probably are best used as a part of a prevention and support program for all students, rather than an approach for intervention for specific student needs. It is one approach schools can take to understand and support positive student behavior, and to assist schools or communities to support positive behavior in children and youth.

Conclusion

The developmental assets of the Search Institute represents a way of conceptualizing adolescent development that focuses on a student’s strengths rather than weaknesses. The 40 identified assets provide benchmarks that significantly predict student’s success in several different areas including academics and social pursuits. The Search Institute provides evidence that this model is a positive alternative to pointing out a student’s flaws by allowing them to identify and capitalize on the positive attributes that they possess. Training and materials are available to schools or community agencies looking to implement the program. Each school must develop and implement an appropriate intervention specific to the asset data that results from the survey. There is very little independent scientific data gathered about the effects of this program.



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