



## UNITING COMMUNITIES TO PROMOTE CHILD AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

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**I**want to describe what is becoming a rapidly expanding national movement designed to awaken and unleash the power of communities to promote positive human development for children and adolescents. A movement that engages multiple sectors of community, it is a comprehensive work, both in naming the developmental targets to be sought and in naming who the actors are in communities. The actors include the people of the city, all of the socializing systems, and the community infrastructures that inform them, including the media and local government.

### HEALTHY COMMUNITIES, HEALTHY YOUTH

Under the banner of *Healthy Communities — Healthy Youth*, this national initiative actually began in 1996 although my organization, Search Institute, just hit its 40th anniversary. Many have discovered us only because of our recent work on developmental assets and community transformation. To a certain degree, our earlier history as an applied research organization was necessary to move us to the work we now champion.

Healthy Communities — Healthy Youth is designed to trigger and support communitywide attention to healthy human development. Nearly 450 cities are connected to the movement. As it evolves and grows and, to a certain extent, spreads too quickly, Search Institute seeks to be its intellectual underpinning. Our organizational challenge is to procure partners to deliver the kinds of training, consulting, and technical assistance needed to support and sustain the initiatives at a local level.

Our work is receiving corporate and foundation support. Lutheran Brotherhood, a national financial services

organization in Minneapolis, serves as the corporate sponsor, providing both long-term funding and a national network of volunteers who assist in community initiatives. National foundations such as Kellogg, Annie E. Casey, and DeWitt Wallace-Readers Digest provide additional support. And regional conversion foundations (i.e., foundations formed from the sale of hospitals) fund statewide initiatives in Colorado (The Colorado Trust) and Kansas (the Kansas Health Foundation). The work is also supported by certain arms of state government, particularly in New Mexico, Ohio, New York, and Alaska, with departments of Public Health or Education helping in many communities.

It is likely that this work is not yet on your radar screens. This may be due to a judgment we made several years ago about where the change-making process begins. In a general sense, we had to choose between launching a grassroots effort and initiating a more traditional top-down process that initially travels through institutions, bureaucracies, and systems. We opted to begin at a grassroots level, encouraging input from local people who were empowered to serve as change-agents within local institutions. Thus, the paradigms we have developed bubble up within communities and, over time, begin to capture the attention of civic leaders. In turn, local affiliates inform their national systems. And it is these national systems which eventually bring our work to the attention of policy-makers.

The work is also starting to enter the scientific literature more directly.

There are three facets we feel important:

- the core theoretical assumptions that undergird Healthy Communities — Healthy Youth;



- the framework of developmental assets (the building blocks of human development we use to unify communities); and
- our model of asset-building community (what a place looks like when it becomes developmentally attentive to all the children and adolescents in its midst) and the core change-making strategies we advocate.

### THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

To activate the developmental capacity of communities, we place high emphasis on uniting residents and their leaders around a vision of the common good. Given the fragmentation of systems and the turf wars that dominate in most cities, we first name elements of positive human development which are important for children and adolescents regardless of race, ethnicity, family income, gender, or geography. We have defined 40 developmental assets with this unifying, bridge-building purpose in mind.

We also seek to activate multiple sources of positive developmental energy, including informal, nonprogrammatic relationships between adults and youth; traditional socializing systems such as families, neighborhoods, schools, and congregations; and the governmental, economic, and policy infrastructures that inform the work of socializing systems. By so doing, we develop a flow of developmental energy within many settings of a child's life, and at the same time, increase the probability of developmental redundancy. The goal is to activate the experiences of support, connection, boundary-setting, and competency building within many settings.

Many obstacles within American communities inhibit the flow of developmental energy. Among these are age segregation and the deep disconnect, particularly during the teen years, of young people from long-term, sustained

relationships with multiple adults. To these we can add the issue of socialization inconsistency that now describes the journey of human development in most communities. Most cities evidence a kind of dissonance in core messages to children and adolescents about boundaries, expectations, and values.

Civic disengagement, a concept often used to explain decline in voting rates, disinterest in community affairs, and declining associational memberships, also interferes with child and adolescent development. Positive human development requires, in our view, the active engagement of citizens. Child and adolescent needs for engagement, empowerment, and connection require a citizenry that seeks relationships with children and adolescents. However, mounting adult cynicism about youth, coupled with a media-driven fear of youth, fuels a retreat from daily engagement. (As a corollary, John McKnight of Northwestern University suggests "the over-professionalization of care" — the creation of caring professions — has robbed the public of some of its natural tendency to provide care. This trend could exacerbate the disconnect between adults and youth.)

Search Institute's national research on American youth demonstrates the disconnect. One developmental asset is having three or more adult relationships that last longer than a year. The idea is to have multiple sources of communication, modeling, and value transmission. But only about a third of sixth- to 12th-grade youth benefit from this developmental asset. As adult influence decreases, peer influence increases.

Our core assumption is that in all towns and cities, there is a deep rupture in the developmental infrastructure. Ultimate processes of socialization are threatened by disengagement, the isolation of families, the fragmentation of social institutions, and the demise of sustained, intergenerational connections.

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To recapture some of the capacity of communities to promote necessary and essential developmental resources, opportunities, and experiences for all youth, three dynamics are crucial:

- a reawakening among community residents of their capacity to make a difference in the lives of children and adolescents;
- a reawakening of socializing systems to their power to promote healthy development; and
- a shared vision of the elements of healthy development which unite and connect citizens and systems.

Search Institute triggers these transformations by providing communities with a portrait of developmental assets of their youth. By so doing, we seek deep change in how communities think about individual and system efficacy.

## THE FRAMEWORK OF DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS

How one names these building blocks of healthy development depends on where one enters the developmental sequence and one's definition of health. The 40 developmental assets are framed around the second decade of life, roughly the middle school through high school years. This is a watershed decade, filled with choices, opportunities, and dangers significantly predictive of long-term adult outcomes and inextricably linked to developmental experiences in the first decade of life.

The developmental assets represent a conceptual model of essential socialization experiences for all young people. The naming of the developmental assets has been guided by a set of lenses, filters, and processes. Each of the assets is rooted in scientific literature, particularly in the intersection of child and adolescent development, and the applied literatures in prevention, protective factors, and resiliency.

In synthesizing this expansive and ever-growing terrain of scientific knowledge, my key interest was to locate those

developmental factors known to be causative or predictive of healthy outcomes.

The conceptualization of health integrates several dimensions. The first is resistance to health-compromising behavior, or "high-risk behavior." Many developmental assets are rooted in the extensive literature on prevention and protective factors: family, school, and community factors that help inoculate youth against acts of substance use, violence and anti-social behavior, sexual activity or teen pregnancy, driving and drinking, and quitting school.

Avoiding health-compromising or future-jeopardizing behavior, however, is only part of the fuller conceptualization of healthy development. Equally important are developmental experiences that promote thriving. Included are school success, affirmation of diversity, compassion for others, leadership, and healthy lifestyle choices (*e.g.*, nutrition, and exercise).

These assets reflect core developmental processes, including the kinds of relationships, social experiences, social environments, and patterns of interaction that are crucial and necessary within a community and over which a

community has considerable control. Therefore, the assets are more about the primary processes of socialization than about the community's economy, service, and physical structure. The developmental assets become both a research tool and a mobilization tool within communities.

As a mobilization tool, the study of developmental assets within a particular city becomes an important wake-up call. About 950 cities in America have completed our profile of assets. This survey usually involves a census of all sixth to 12th graders in a city, from public schools, parochial schools, and alternative schools.

We use the information about developmental assets to help ignite the initial spark of change in a community. Based on a sample of 99,000 students in 213 communities, we know:

- The average number of assets is 18.0. Boys average

*Text continues on page 46*





## SEARCH INSTITUTE'S 40 DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS

ASSET TYPE	ASSET NAME AND DEFINITION	
EXTERNAL ASSETS	<p><b>SUPPORT</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Family support — Family life provides high levels of love and support.</li> <li>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).</li> <li>3. Other adult relationships — Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.</li> <li>4. Caring neighborhood — Young person experiences caring neighbors.</li> <li>5. Caring school climate — School provides a caring, encouraging environment.</li> <li>6. Parent involvement in schooling — Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.</li> </ol>	
	<p><b>EMPOWERMENT</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Community values youth — Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.</li> <li>8. Youth as resources — Young people are given useful roles in the community.</li> <li>9. Service to others — Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.</li> <li>10. Safety — Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.</li> </ol>	
	<p><b>BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Family boundaries — Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.</li> <li>12. School boundaries — School provides clear rules and consequences.</li> <li>13. Neighborhood boundaries — Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.</li> <li>14. Adult role models — Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.</li> <li>15. Positive peer influence — Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.</li> <li>16. High expectations — Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.</li> </ol>	
	<p><b>CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17. Creative activities — Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.</li> <li>18. Youth programs — Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organization at school and/or in the community.</li> <li>19. Religious community — Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.</li> <li>20. Time at home — Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.</li> </ol>	
	INTERNAL ASSETS	<p><b>COMMITMENT TO LEARNING</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>21. Achievement motivation — Young person is motivated to do well in school.</li> <li>22. School engagement — Young person is actively engaged in learning.</li> <li>23. Homework — Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.</li> <li>24. Bonding to school — Young person cares about her or his school.</li> <li>25. Reading for pleasure — Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.</li> </ol>
		<p><b>POSITIVE VALUES</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>26. Caring — Young person places high value on helping other people.</li> <li>27. Equality and social justice — Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.</li> <li>28. Integrity — Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.</li> </ol>



PROMOTING POSITIVE AND HEALTHY BEHAVIORS IN CHILDREN

INTERNAL ASSETS

ASSET TYPE	ASSET NAME AND DEFINITION
SOCIAL COMPETENCIES	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.
	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.
POSITIVE Identity	35. Resistance skills — Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
	36. Peaceful conflict resolution — Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.
	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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three developmental assets less than girls (16.5 vs. 19.5).

- The number of developmental assets are not strongly related to family income.
- Urban youth in lower-income families have about three and a half developmental assets less than those raised in higher income families.
- The average number of assets is surprisingly similar in small towns and urban centers.

Communities hear two messages when their developmental asset profile becomes part of their civic discourse (often initiated in a town meeting, some of which draw 2,000 community residents):

- First, “All youth in our city need more of these building blocks than they now have.” Typically, community profiles show that fewer than 10 percent possess more than 30 assets and that two-

thirds experience 20 or fewer of the assets.

- Second, as the number of assets rises, major reductions occur in alcohol use, tobacco use, illicit drug use, early sexual activity, violence, anti-social behavior, and gambling. A rise in the developmental assets is linked to increases in school success, the affirmation of diversity, and other thriving indicators.

There is not, we discover, a subset of four, six, eight, or 10 of these that assures positive human development. It is the combination of support, empowerment, engagement, structure, boundary, value, competency, and identity that is important for framing a life.

In examining all factors, from the community’s size and geography to race, ethnicity, family income, gender, and age, we have found the presence of these 40 developmental assets remains a powerful predictor of health.

## COMMUNITY ASSET BUILDING

**F**ifteen targets help define the dynamics of asset-building community:

1. All residents take personal responsibility for building assets in children and adolescents.
2. The community thinks and acts intergenerationally.
3. The community builds a consensus on values and boundaries, which it seeks to articulate and model.
4. All children and teenagers frequently engage in service to others.
5. Families are supported, educated, and equipped to elevate asset building to top priority.
6. All children and teenagers receive frequent expressions of support in both informal settings and in places where youth gather.
7. Neighborhoods are places of caring, support, and safety.
8. Schools — both elementary and secondary — mobilize to promote caring, clear boundaries and sustained relationships with adults.
9. Businesses establish family-friendly policies and embrace asset-building principles for young employees.
10. Virtually all youth 10 to 18 years old are involved in one or more clubs, teams, or other youth-serving organizations that see building assets as central to their mission.
11. The media repeatedly communicate the community’s vision, support mobilization efforts, and provide forums for sharing innovative actions taken by individuals and organizations.
12. All professionals and volunteers who work with youth receive training in asset building.
13. Youth have opportunities to serve, lead, and make decisions.
14. Religious institutions mobilize their resources to build assets within their own programs and in the community.
15. The communitywide commitment to asset building is long term and sustained.



## CREATING ASSET-BUILDING COMMUNITIES

As we support a growing network of 450 communities seeking to unleash asset-building power, we provide models and resources to trigger actions, with an emphasis on mobilizing a critical mass of adults and youth in all settings (e.g., families, neighborhoods, schools, congregations, youth organizations, public places, workplaces).

Asset-building communities — healthy communities for children and adolescents — have a shared commitment. They are relational and intergenerational places that emphasize support, empowerment, boundaries, opportunities, and a united goal of developing internal assets. Developmental assets become a language of the common good, and the commitment to engage citizens and systems pursuing this common good is visible, long term, and inclusive. This is a vision of a city’s developmental infrastructure. As such, there also are economic and service infrastructures that are needed to address additional concerns, such as jobs, safety, and racial and socioeconomic inequities.

Much of our work now is devoted to creating resources to support community transformations. These include the production of print and video resources and the development of systems for speaking, training, and consulting. As the movement expands, we evolve ways for communities — from Seattle, Washington, to Rochester, New York — to learn from each other. An annual Healthy Communities — Healthy Youth conference gathers 1,000-1,500 adults and youth from 40 or more states to link, learn, and celebrate.

A parallel commitment is to increase our scientific work on the processes and dynamics of sustainable community change. Via our first statewide initiative, Assets for Colorado Youth, we have launched several longitudinal

studies to document the effects of community initiatives on both developmental assets and civic life.

## A CITIZENS’ MOVEMENT

A movement has been unleashed. The models of developmental assets and asset-building community spread more rapidly than Search Institute can manage or control. But movements are like that. They cannot be controlled, nor should they be.

This changes our work at Search Institute. To a certain extent, we are not the teachers of a way, but teammates with communities in discovering how to create and sustain deep change. What we are learning is that much of the wisdom about change for human development is vested in the people of communities. Our work now is more about learning what communities can teach us than teaching communities how to proceed.

If I knew the 48 steps for deep community change around human development, I would not tell anybody what they are. Because what we are seeing in towns and cities across the country is the incredible power of people to come together around a shared vision, to unite across areas of power and control, to discover their own strengths,

then to ask us in Minneapolis to provide support when they need it.

The engine needed to drive all of this is the people of our cities. Civic engagement is at the heart of transforming communities. President Jimmy Carter has said this well: “The only title in our democracy superior to that of president is citizen.”

It is a truth we embrace. And when citizens are united and empowered and engaged, the needle gauging child and adolescent health springs forward.

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