

Childhood and Adolescence: Developmental Assets

Developmental assets represent a theoretical construct first articulated in 1990 (Benson 1990). Based on a synthesis of scientific studies in pertinent fields, developmental assets identify a series of social and psychological strengths which function to enhance health outcomes for children and adolescents. The purposes of ongoing research pertaining to developmental assets are to develop new lines of scientific inquiry on the sources and consequences of strength-building approaches in child and adolescent development and to attempt to provide a conceptual roadmap to guide the design and implementation of community-wide initiatives that are aimed at promoting healthy development among children and adolescents. The conceptual, research, and application dimensions of developmental assets are described here.

1. Developmental Assets in Social and Conceptual Context

The framework of developmental assets weaves together into an a priori conceptual model, a set of developmental experiences, resources, and opportunities, each of which contributes to important health outcomes, conceived as both the reduction of health-compromising behaviors and the increase of positive or thriving outcomes such as school success. Though the framework is supported by scientific study, it was purposefully designed to fuel and guide community-based approaches to strengthen the natural and inherent socialization capacity of communities. Therefore, assets include the kinds of relationships, social experiences, social environments, and patterns of interaction known to promote health and over which a community has considerable control.

Developmental assets, then, represent a framework, grounded in scientific study, with the applied aim of reweaving the developmental infrastructure of a community by activating multiple sources of asset building. These include informal, nonprogrammatic relationships between adults and youth; traditional socializing systems such as families, neighborhoods, schools, congregations, and youth organizations; and the governmental, economic, and policy infrastructures which inform those socializing systems. The intent is to encourage the mobilization of asset-building efforts within many settings of a child's life and to increase those efforts for all children and adolescents within a community. The developmental assets framework, the theoretical underpinnings of the framework, and its partner concept of asset-building communities are discussed in depth in a series of recent publications (e.g., Benson 1997, Benson 1998, Benson et al. 1998).

1.1 Connection to Other Areas of Scientific Inquiry

The developmental asset framework is related to several other streams of scientific study, which also seek to identify positive developmental experiences and competencies known to enhance health and well-being among adolescents. Among these is the emerging exploration of protective factors in the fields of alcohol, tobacco, and pregnancy prevention. For example, Resnick and his colleagues (1997) demonstrated the importance of family and school connections in reducing multiple forms of health risk behaviors. Similarly, the study of resiliency has identified characteristics that enable some children to navigate through and around what often are debilitating environmental risks and experiences. This has contributed considerably to our understanding of the scope and nature of social and psychological strengths (Masten et al. 1990, Rutter 1985, Werner and Smith 1992). In addition, the more applied field of youth development champions the inclusion of this emerging body of knowledge about developmental strengths into policy, programs, and practice (Pittman and Cahill 1991). The developmental asset model builds on these areas of inquiry and includes a number of elements from them in the 40 core developmental assets.

The developmental asset framework also provides a complementary approach to the paradigm of deficit reduction. A deficit reduction model is focused on reducing threats, obstacles, and risks that interfere with healthy development. Among these are abuse; neighborhood violence; access to alcohol, other drugs, and firearms; poverty; and family dysfunction. While research has shown that these factors are related to a number of negative outcomes, efforts that focus mainly on controlling or reducing them represent incomplete approaches to health promotion. As Benson and colleagues (Benson 1997, Benson et al. 1998) have discussed,

approaches which depend exclusively on deficit reduction may unintentionally expand the role of professionals, programs, and policy in child and adolescent health. This may be to the detriment of more informal and natural capacities that may be rooted in the community.

The asset model provides, then, an alternative and complementary set of 'benchmarks' or targets that can be added to the necessary and influential paradigm of risk reduction. Rather than focusing solely on problems or threats to be reduced, it accents relationships, experiences, resources, and opportunities to be promoted.

1.2 Community as a Context for Human Development

The developmental asset framework is also connected, both intellectually and strategically, to the fields of community change and community building. These areas have historically focused on the economic, service, and environmental infrastructures of a city, defining both the inherent capacity of local communities for promoting civic health (Kretzman and McKnight 1993, McKnight 1995) and identifying those core processes of engaged community which can inform the health of residents. Among these emerging constructs are social trust, personal efficacy, and social capital (Sampson et al. 1997). In addition, the conceptualization and definition of the developmental assets were informed by other community research efforts focusing on the concepts of social norms, civic engagement, indigenous leadership, and community capacity building (Benson 1997, Benson et al. 1998).

2. The Developmental Asset Framework

The original configuration of 30 developmental assets (e.g., Benson 1990) was expanded to 40 developmental assets in 1996, based on analysis of data gathered on 254,000 6th-12th-grade students, additional synthesis of child and adolescent research, and consultations with researchers and practitioners (Benson 1997). The framework's conceptual foundations are based on empirical studies of child and adolescent development, as well as applied studies in prevention, health promotion, and resiliency. The development of this conceptual foundation involved a research synthesis which focused on integrating developmental experiences that are widely known to inform three types of health outcomes among adolescents: (a) the prevention of high-risk behaviors (e.g., substance use, violence, sexual intercourse, school dropout); (b) the enhancement of thriving outcomes (e.g., school success, affirmation of diversity, prosocial behavior); and (c) resiliency or the capacity to overcome adversity. The assets were framed initially around adolescent development and they are assessed through a self-report survey (Leffert et al. 1998). The assets were extended downward conceptually to include young children (birth-age 10) which then encompasses a more lifespan context (Roehlkepartain and Leffert 2000).

The conceptualization of the asset framework identified naming developmental factors that were particularly robust in predicting health outcomes and for which there was evidence that they could be generalized across gender, race/ethnicity, and family income. In addition, the assets were conceived to reflect core developmental processes which include the relationships, social experiences, social environments, patterns of interaction, norms, and competencies over which a community of people has considerable control. That is, the assets are more about the primary processes of socialization than the equally important arenas of economy, services, and physical infrastructure of a city (Benson et al. 1998).

Because the developmental asset framework was designed not only to inform theory and research but also to have practical significance for the mobilization of communities, the 40 assets are placed in categories that have conceptual integrity and can be described easily to the residents of a community. As seen in Table 1, they are grouped into 20 external assets (i.e., environmental, contextual, and relational features of socializing systems) and 20 internal assets (i.e., skills, competencies, and commitments). The external assets include four categories: (a) support, (b) empowerment, (c) boundaries and expectations, and (d) constructive use of time. The internal assets are also placed in 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).

3. Measurement, Descriptive Data, and Prediction

Since 1996, numerous studies of 6th-12th-grade young people in public and private schools in the United States have been conducted using the Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors, a self-report survey. This 156-item self-report survey measures the 40 developmental assets, developmental deficits (e.g., whether youth watch too much television or are victims of violence), thriving indicators (e.g., school success, physical health behaviors), and high-risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol and other substance use, antisocial behavior, school problems) (Leffert et al. 1998). The most recent aggregate sample is made up of 99,462 6th-12th-grade youth from public and alternative schools in 213 cities and towns in the United States who took the survey during the 1996-7 academic year. This sample has served as a focal point for several studies of the relation of assets to risk behaviors and thriving outcomes (Benson et al. 1998, Leffert et al. 1998, Scales et al. 2000).

3.1 Examples of Descriptive Data and the Additive Nature of Developmental Assets

The self-report survey is primarily used as a means of communicating aggregate data on a community's youth. A report, developed for each city or school district that uses the survey, often becomes a widely shared document and is used to frame a community-wide discussion and serves as a focal point to mobilize around raising healthy youth (Benson et al. 1998). A dichotomous form of reporting the assets, whereby each asset is simplified into a single percentage of youth who have, or do not have, the asset, is utilized as an effective method for communicating the asset profile to diverse subgroups within a community. This also allows for a simple summation of the average number of youth assets in any given community. Based on this aggregate sample, youth report having, on average, 18 of the 40 developmental assets. As part of a standardized report, communities also receive a breakdown of the percentage of young people who report different levels of developmental assets. In the aggregate sample, 20 percent have 0-10 assets, 42 percent have 11-20, 30 percent have 21-30, and 8 percent have 31-40 (Benson et al. 1998). When these categories are combined in cross-tabulation with risk behaviors or thriving indicators, they become a significant source of information for community members. For example, Table 2 shows the percentage of 6th-12th grade youth in the aggregate sample who report that they engage in each of 10 risk behavior patterns by their level of developmental assets. The table also includes a definition of each risk behavior pattern. It is important to note that for each of the 10 risk behavior patterns, the percentage of students reporting the risk behavior declines as the level of assets rises. This same relationship between assets and risk behaviors has been observed across grade, gender, racial or ethnic group, and across all communities studied.

The opposite pattern between level of assets and positive or thriving behaviors has also been repeatedly demonstrated. For these assessments youth who report fewer assets are also less likely to report each of the thriving indicators including school success and the affirmation of diversity (Benson et al. 1998).

3.2 Grade and Gender Differences

Some variation has been observed across communities and in different subgroups of adolescents. Overall, females report experiencing more of the assets than males. With males and females across each of the asset levels, 45 percent of females report that they experience more than half of the 40 assets compared to 30 percent of males who report that they experience more than half of the assets.

When comparing the effect of grade and gender differences in each of the individual assets, at least small effects (about 0.20; Cohen 1988) are observed in about one-half of the assets, suggesting somewhat pervasive, but small, differences in the contextual experiences of boys and girls over the adolescent years (Leffert et al. 1998). In addition, a fairly consistent decline in the reports of the assets for both males and females across this age period are found. That is, young adolescents (i.e., 6th-8th graders) tend to report experiencing more of the assets than older adolescents (i.e., 9th-12th graders) (see Table 3).

3.3 Prediction of Risk Behaviors and Thriving Indicators

In reports to participating communities, analyses similar to that presented in Table 2 are included to demonstrate the relation of developmental assets to both the risk behaviors and thriving indicators. In other studies using aggregate samples, regression analyses are used to assess the extent to which the developmental assets are useful in predicting either a reduction in risk behaviors (Leffert et al. 1998) or a promotion of thriving indicators (Scales et al. 2000). Those analyses have shown that demographic variables accounted for a range of 5-14 percent of the total variance of each of the models constructed to examine risk behaviors. In each analysis, a set of the developmental assets contributed a significant amount over and above the influence of the demographic variables, accounting for a total of 21-41 percent of the variance explained in the reduction of each of the individual risk behavior patterns and for 66 percent of the variance in a composite index of risk behaviors.

Similarly, Scales and colleagues (Scales et al. 2000) examined the extent to which developmental assets predicted thriving behaviors and how it varied across different ethnic groups. The demographic variables accounted for a range of 1-8 percent of the total variance explained by each of the models and each model accounted for a total of 10-43 percent of the variance explained in the individual thriving indicators and from 47 to 54 percent of the variance explained in a thriving index.

4. Application

Developmental assets, then, have particular utility for predicting reduction in multiple forms of risk-taking and thriving behavior (e.g., Leffert et al. 1998, Scales et al. 2000). The descriptive portraits of assets from hundreds of American communities suggest that these developmental asset targets are normatively fragile. A set of comprehensive and interlocking strategies have been proposed to mobilize the inherent and natural asset-building capacity of community residents (Benson 1997, Benson et al. 1998) and community socializing systems, including families (Roehlkepartain and Leffert 2000), schools (Starkman et al. 1999), congregations (Roehlkepartain 1998), and youth-serving organizations (Nelson 1998). New conceptual and measurement efforts are underway to extend the asset framework to a series of developmental phases in the 0-20 age range.

Though the focus of this last section is on the influence of communities, it is noted here that the developmental assets construct can be applied in a wide variety of ways. For example, national youth-serving systems and their local affiliates utilize the framework for strategic planning and as a training tool for staff, boards, and volunteers. A growing number of foundations utilize the work for both frame-funding initiatives and to evaluate proposals. Professionals (e.g., social workers, counselors) utilize the framework to design interventions for individual children and adolescents.

4.1 Defining Asset-building Communities

Asset-building communities are geographies of place which maximize attentiveness to promoting developmental strengths for all children and adolescents (Benson 1997). The dynamics and processes by which communities mobilize their asset-building capacity are a relatively unexplored line of inquiry, both theoretically and empirically. An initial framework for understanding the asset-building capacity of communities provides a set of core principles (Benson 1997, Benson et al. 1998). Among these are the principles of developmental redundancy (the exposure to asset-building people and environments within multiple contexts), developmental depth (a focus on nurturing most or all assets in children and adolescents), and developmental breadth (extending, by purpose and design, the reach of asset-building energy to all children and adolescents).

In activating these core principles, five sources of asset-building potential are hypothesized to exist within all communities, each of which can be marshaled via a multiplicity of community mobilization strategies. These sources of potential asset-building influence include: (a) sustained relationships with adults, both within and beyond family; (b) peer group influence (when peers choose to activate their asset-building capacity); (c) socializing systems; (d) community-level social norms, ceremony, ritual, policy, and resource allocation; and (e) programs, including school- and community-based efforts to nurture and build skills and competencies.

In brief, asset-building communities are distinguished as relational and intergenerational places, with a critical mass of socializing institutions (e.g., families, schools, neighborhoods, youth organizations, religious communities) choosing to attend to the developmental needs of all children and adolescents. Developmental assets become a language of the common good, uniting sectors, citizens, and policy in the pursuit of shared targets for all children and adolescents. The commitment of a community and its people, institutions, and organizations is both long-term and inclusive.

Ultimately, rebuilding and strengthening the developmental infrastructure in a community are conceived less as a program implemented and managed by professionals and more as a mobilization of public will and capacity. A major target for this level of community engagement is the creation of a normative culture in which all residents are expected by virtue of their membership in the community to promote the positive development of children and adolescents.

Within the context of American society, this vision requires considerable transformation in prevailing resident and socialization systems, norms, and operating principles. As argued in numerous publications defining this conceptual model of asset-building community, American cities are typically marked by age segregation, civic disengagement, social mistrust, a loss of personal efficacy, and the lack of collaboration across systems.

4.2 Asset-building Communities: The National Movement

The marshaling of community capacity to consistently and deeply attend to the development of children and adolescents is conceived less as the implementation of a program and more the awakening of latent human and institutional potential to build developmental strengths. A series of practical tools targeted at community residents and civic leaders provides conceptual and strategic counsel for mobilizing asset-building capacity. The first asset-building initiative began in St. Louis Park, Minnesota in 1995. In the following five years, more than 500 other American communities began to craft community-wide initiatives. Organized more as a social movement than as the replication of a program, communities are encouraged to tailor their initiatives to local realities and capacities and in response to the data from local asset profiles. Because these initiatives are complex, multi-sector 'experiments' in changing local culture, and because they occur in a variety of rural, suburban, and urban settings, there is increasing investment in learning from these communities about innovations and effective practices in mobilizing residents and systems, with 'feedback loops' emerging to inform both the theory of community change and the development of practical resources. Several longitudinal studies will add additional insight to this evolving knowledge about the influence of community on human development.