

Building Healthy Kids by Building Healthy Families and Communities

By Susan Fortier and Steven Fortier

There are unique challenges and opportunities for parents and children these days. Today's young people face a tough combination of social and health challenges—high rates of violence, smoking, early sexual activity, school failure, and alcohol and other drug use. Fortunately, young people and all of us that support them—parents, educators, service providers, coaches, community leaders, and neighbors—now have a research-based model that can help us answer the question, “What can I do to help kids succeed?”

The Search Institute, a Minneapolis-based action research non-profit, has in recent years identified 40 “developmental assets” that form the foundation of healthy youth development. Search Institute found that the fewer assets a young person experiences, the more they are involved in risk-taking behaviors. The research also shows that the more assets a young person experiences, the more likely they are to “thrive.” See “40 Developmental Assets” chart on page 3.

For example, 53% of youth studied with ten assets or less participated in problem alcohol use. Conversely, only 3% of youth with 31-40 assets engaged in problem alcohol use. In this same group with 31-40 assets, 53% succeeded in school, while only 7% of their counterparts with less than ten assets did the same.

Similar trends were documented in the areas of illicit drug use, sexual activity, violence, valuing diversity, maintenance of good health, and delay of gratification. Consistently, youth with high numbers of assets tended to resist high-risk behaviors and demonstrated positive behaviors and attitudes (“The Power of Assets,” Search Institute 1997).

Armed with this knowledge, parents can become champions of the Asset Development approach to youth development. To do so first requires us to apply the model in our parenting and family life. Then, we need to help others who impact the lives of our children to act in ways that support the development of these assets.

As parents, we are deeply concerned about our children's well-being and the choices they make that will affect their lives both today and well into the future. The Search Institute's findings support an approach to positive youth development that challenges us to focus on developing healthier community conditions rather than reacting to symptoms once they appear. By doing so, we'll reduce the incidence of a wide-variety of problems at the same time.

The Developmental Assets research also makes it clear that no one system in a community, including families, can prevent young people from facing problems that can derail their healthy development. Parents must become involved in ensuring that their children's schools, neighborhoods, support systems, sports teams, hangouts, and friends are building assets, too.

Search Institute and YMCA of the USA, the national resource center supporting the success of local YMCAs, are currently working on a joint research project called “Parents as Asset Builders.” After a preliminary analysis of how families might effectively provide their children with the 40 Developmental Assets, YMCA of the USA suggests that parents can ask themselves the following questions:

- In what ways does your family provide support that enhances your children's health and well-being, including positive family communication, involvement in schooling, general love and support, and engendering supportive relationships with nonfamilial adults? In what ways does your child experience caring neighborhoods and school climates? (Assets 1-6)

- In what ways do you empower your children by giving them appropriate opportunities for input and decision-making within the family? In what ways do you connect them with opportunities to make a difference in the community? How do you help keep your kids safe and make them feel safe? (Assets 7-10)
- In what ways do you set clear rules and consequences; encourage your child to do their best; and model positive, responsible behavior? To what extent are there consistent, clear boundaries and expectations in the neighborhood and school? (Assets 11-16)
- How do you connect your children with constructive activities, programs, and opportunities that build skills, self-esteem, and positive relationships? (Assets 17-20)
- How do you demonstrate and support a commitment to learning? (Assets 21-25)
- In what ways does your family demonstrate, communicate, and support positive values? (Assets 26-31)
- How do you model, teach and provide opportunities to develop and practice social competencies? (Assets 32-36)
- In what ways does your family stimulate and support your child's positive self-image? (Assets 37-40)

Susan Fortier is the Program Director of the Meeting Waters YMCA, which serves over 20 VT and NH communities in the lower Connecticut River Valley. Steve Fortier is Executive Director of the Meeting Waters YMCA and the founder of the Alstead, NH-based CommuniTeam Training and Consulting, which focuses on developing healthier communities in which young people can thrive. For more, visit the Meeting Waters YMCA website at www.meetingwatersYMCA.org, CommuniTeam at www.communiteam.org, or Search Institute at www.search-institute.org.

40 Developmental Assets

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



Category	Asset Name and Definition	
External Assets	Support <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 parents. 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) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school. 	
	Empowerment <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 one hour or more per week. 10. Safety-Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood. 	
	Boundaries & Expectations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 one hour 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.
		Positive Values <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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