

Tuning in the Top 40

ASSET BUILDING

Is it luck, magic, or just the presence of *developmental assets* that enables some teens to forgo self-destructive behavior and aim towards success? Can a healthy stash of assets like having the ability to establish friendships or being involved in the arts safely guide youth through the tribulations of adolescence to emerge healthy and victorious? Research from the field tells us that the answer to these questions is yes, assets do make a difference!



by Selena Polston

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In a 1989 survey of over 46,000 American youth ages 11–18, investigators from the Search Institute in Minneapolis attempted to answer the question, “what is it that makes some youth able to resist drugs, alcohol and other problems?” Instead of taking the traditional problem-based approach (looking for what is wrong), the Search investigators started with “what is right” and interviewed youth who were making healthy choices to uncover what was unique about them. What they discovered was that youth who demonstrated drug-free and positive behavior were equipped with high numbers of developmental assets. These assets took the form of both *external experiences*—e.g., supportive families, adult role models, involvement in creative, academic and religious endeavors—and *internal characteristics*—e.g., honesty, restraint, school bonding. Eventually, 40 distinct assets were identified. See Figure 1, page 2.

To confirm that these 40 assets were the influencing factors, the Search team conducted follow-up research. Investigators tested their new list of assets on over 250,000 students in the general junior high and high school population, measuring the relationship between each youth’s behavior—both positive and negative—and the number of assets each youth experienced in their lives. What they found put their doubts to rest. Across the board, youths with more assets demonstrated higher levels of positive behavior—e.g., success in school, getting along with others, maintaining good health—and lower levels of risking behavior—e.g., alcohol and drug use, early sexual activity, violence. The reverse was true of youth with fewer assets. See Figures 2 and 3, page 3.

continued on page 3

prevention *Tactics* 2:4 (1998)

Tactics (tak'tiks) *n.* 1. a plan for promoting a desired end. 2. the art of the possible.

FIGURE 1

40 Development Assets

Search Institute identified the following building blocks of healthy development that help young people grow up into caring and responsible adults. The percentages of young people who experience each asset are based on almost 100,000 6th–12th graders surveyed in 213 towns and cities in the United States in the 1996-97 school year.

EXTERNAL ASSETS

SUPPORT	1. Family support —Family life provides high levels of love and support. 64%
	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) 26%
	3. Other adult relationships —Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults. 41%
	4. Caring neighborhood —Young person experiences caring neighbors. 40%
	5. Caring school climate —School provides a caring, encouraging environment. 24%
EMPOWERMENT	6. Parent involvement in school —Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school. 29%
	7. Community values youth —Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth. 20%
	8. Youth as resources —Young people are given useful roles in the community. 24%
	9. Service to others —Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week. 50%
	10. Safety —Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood. 55%
BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS	11. Family boundaries —Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts. 43%
	12. School boundaries —School provides clear rules and consequences. 46%
	13. Neighborhood boundaries —Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior. 46%
	14. Adult role models —Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior. 27%
	15. Positive peer influence —Young person's best friends model responsible behavior. 60%
CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME	16. High expectations —Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well. 41%
	17. Creative activities —Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts. 19%
	18. Youth programs —Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community. 59%
	19. Religious community —Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution. ... 64%
	20. Time at home —Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week. 50%

INTERNAL ASSETS

COMMITMENT TO LEARNING	21. Achievement motivation —Young person is motivated to do well in school. 63%
	22. School engagement —Young person is actively engaged in learning. 64%
	23. Homework —Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day. 45%
	24. Bonding to school —Young person cares about her or his school. 51%
	25. Reading for pleasure —Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week. 24%
POSITIVE VALUES	26. Caring —Young person places high value on helping other people. 43%
	27. Equality and social justice —Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty. 45%
	28. Integrity —Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs. 63%
	29. Honesty —Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.” 63%
	30. Responsibility —Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility. 60%
SOCIAL COMPETENCIES	31. Restraint —Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs. 42%
	32. Planning and decision making —Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices. 29%
	33. Interpersonal competence —Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills. 43%
	34. Cultural competence —Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds. 35%
	35. Resistance skills —Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations. 37%
POSITIVE IDENTITY	36. Peaceful conflict resolution —Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently. 44%
	37. Personal power —Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.” 45%
	38. Self-esteem —Young person reports having a high self-esteem. 47%
	39. Sense of purpose —Young person reports that “my life has purpose.” 55%
	40. Positive view of personal future —Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future. 70%

Tuning in the Top 40 (continued from page 1)

The results of the study left the investigators with good and bad news. The good news was that the presence of just 31 assets increased the chances of youth making healthy choices by a staggering 70 percent while decreasing their chances of

getting involved with drugs, alcohol, violence or early sexual activity by 50 percent. The bad news was that the average number of assets experienced by youth in the general population survey was only 16. See Figure 4, below.

Why Do So Many Youth Have So Few Assets?

The profound weakening of family and community structures combined with the decrease in educational and extracurricular funding over the last decade has meant that many young people don't have the environments and supports they need to develop sufficient assets. An alarming number of young people today do not have a single positive relationship with an adult. Moreover, opportunities for youth to develop social skills and decision-making abilities have become scarce. Studies have shown that this deficiency in environments and supports affects all types of youth, regardless of age, gender, geographical region or race/ethnicity.



FIGURE 2

ASSETS PROMOTE POSITIVE ATTITUDES & BEHAVIORS IN YOUTH

Having more assets increases the chances that young people will have positive attitudes and behaviors.

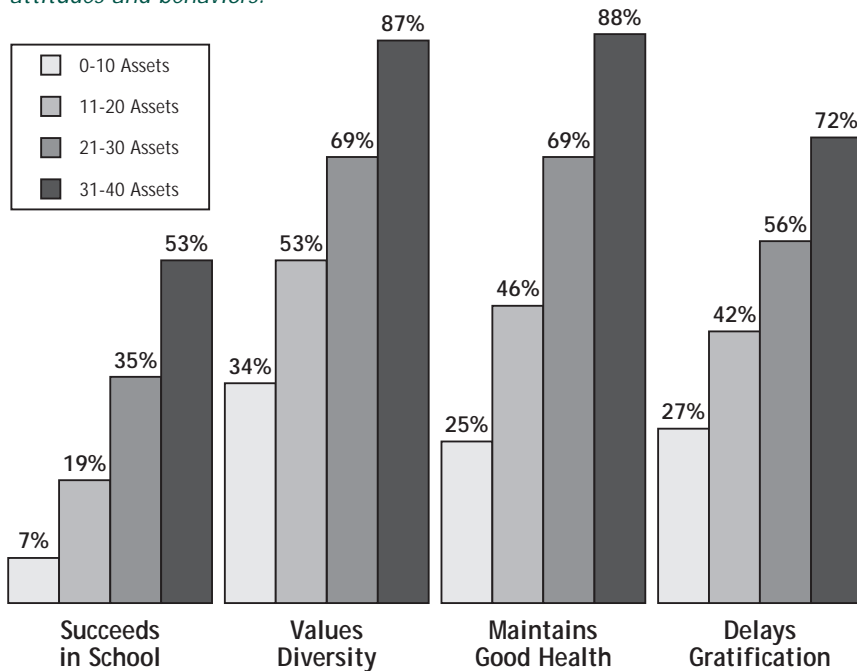


FIGURE 3

ASSETS PROTECT YOUTH FROM HIGH-RISK BEHAVIORS

Youth with the most assets are least likely to engage in four different patterns of high-risk behavior.

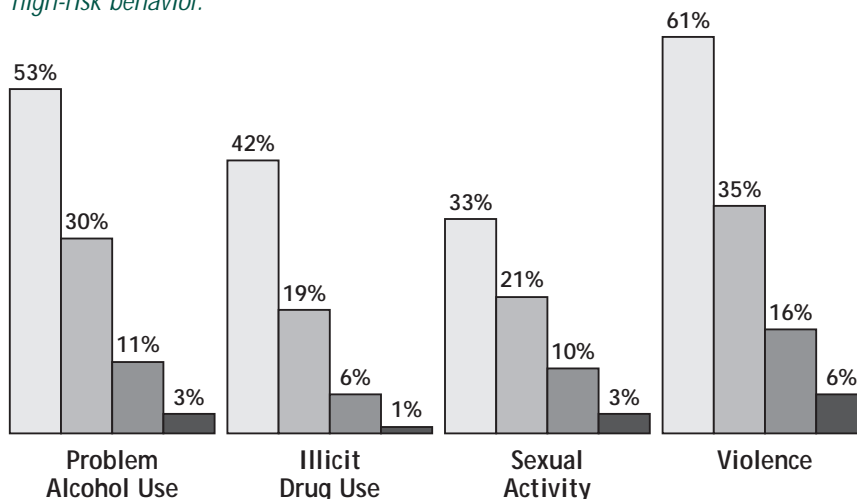
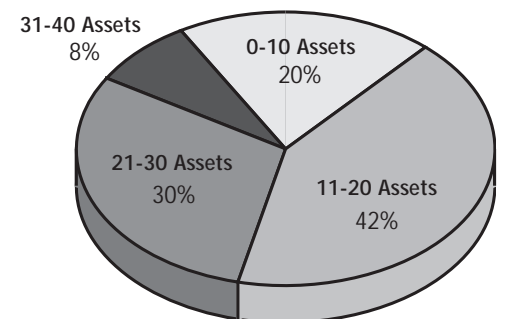


FIGURE 4

ASSET LEVELS AMONG YOUTH



FIGURES 2-4: Search Institute, 1997 study

CONCEPTS IN ACTION

MAINE:**What Kids Need to Succeed***Getting Parents Started Early*

Parents of kindergartners in Kennebunk, Maine, learn about asset building from day one. Each September, parents of new students receive a copy of the book *What Kids Need to Succeed* and are invited to short asset-building workshops.

MISSOURI:**Ozarks Fighting Back***Bringing Employers on Board*

Ozarks Fighting Back, an asset-building initiative in Springfield, Missouri, surveyed local companies about flexible work options open to families with children, then developed a brochure highlighting the value of flexible options and the cost—both to workers and companies—of not having options available.

MINNEAPOLIS:**What's Up?***Connecting Youth through a Resource and Referral Line*

The Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board developed a *What's Up?*, a phone line that connects young people to programs designed especially for them, after a study found that half of Minneapolis' young people ages 7 to 14 were not involved in youth development programs due to a lack of knowledge about their availability. Now youth can make one phone call and receive information on everything from mentorship and job opportunities to athletic and social activities.

Picture an Asset-Building Community*

WHAT DOES an asset-building community look like? How will we know when we are moving in the right direction?

Use the following description as a yardstick for measuring where your community stands and where it still needs to go. Remember, not all communities will look the same or take the same approach to building assets in their youth.

An asset-building community is one where...

- 1 Assets are nurtured in all young people rather than focusing on only youth who are considered "at risk."
- 2 Building relationships between people is more important than building new programs and interventions.
- 3 Everyone—parents, teachers, business people, elders, congregation members—sees themselves as responsible for youth.
- 4 Asset-building activities begin before birth—e.g., giving parents-to-be necessary skills and knowledge—and continue until youth become independent adults.
- 5 Consistent messages are sent about how youth are valued and what is expected from youth.
- 6 Youth have opportunities to serve, lead and make decisions.
- 7 All children and teenagers receive frequent expressions of support in places where they gather.
- 8 Businesses establish family-friendly policies and embrace asset-building principles for young employees.
- 9 Virtually all youth between the ages of 10–18 are involved in one or more clubs, teams, or other youth-serving organizations that understand asset-building as central to their mission.

* Adapted from "Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth: A National Initiative of Search Institute to Unite Communities for Children and Adolescents," Search Institute, 1998.

Investing Time and Commitment

SO HOW DO WE begin building assets where there are few or none?

The truth is that building assets is neither complicated nor expensive. In fact, assets are built every day without anyone realizing it. It happens every time youth interact with caring, responsible adults and peers.

Although building assets does not require a lot of money, specialized knowledge or fancy equipment, it does require a substantial amount of time and commitment. Just as marketing experts have learned that people need to hear a message several times before they fully grasp

and act on it, asset-building proponents have learned that only by surrounding youth with asset-building experiences will they absorb and internalize those assets.

This means it is critical for all players in a youth's life to become actively involved in promoting assets through a variety of methods and activities. These can range from sponsoring a youth council to joining a neighborhood watch to simply listening more closely to youth when they speak. What is most important is the quantity, quality and diversity of asset-building opportunities offered to youth.



SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

CALLING ALL ADULTS!

Assets are built whenever key people in the lives of youth—that includes parents, teachers, coaches, counselors, rabbis, employers and others—do the following:

- Help young people feel loved, supported and accepted.
- Set consistent and appropriate boundaries.
- Engage young people in constructive, healthy activities.
- Help young people stay committed to education and learning.
- Nurture the development of values in young people.
- Help young people build life skills and a sense of competency.
- Model responsible behavior.

Are you building assets?

Reflect on your daily interaction with youth and review this list again. What are you doing well? Where you could improve?

CONCEPTS IN ACTION

MICHIGAN: Community Resource List

*Answering Common Questions
About Youth Needs*

To connect youth to available resources, the city of Aurora, Michigan, compiled a community resource list that provides detailed answers to 25 of the most commonly asked questions regarding youth needs. The list covers areas such as low- or no-cost recreation programs, mental health services, library services and arts programs.

KANSAS CITY: YouthNet

*Taking a Look at Neighborhoods
Spurs Youth Into Action*

YouthNet of Kansas City believes every youth should have a safe place to go within walking distance from home, a place where youth have access to caring adults and positive activities. To find these places, YouthNet hired 70 young people to survey 110 square miles, enter the findings into a database, and make follow-up calls to verify the information. The young people immediately noticed something surprising: Kansas City has more liquor stores than places for youth. According to YouthNet staff, these young workers became increasingly invested and interested in their community as a result of taking a look around their neighborhoods. Using the suggestions of the youth investigators, YouthNet made plans to set up a hotline for youth to find safe places to go near their homes.

Building Assets Youth Experience Least

All assets are of equal importance and their positive effects are cumulative—in other words, the more, the better. Attention must therefore be focused on building those assets that youth experience least often. Search Institute's 1997 study

revealed that while 60–70 percent of youth experience family support and have a positive view of the future, only 20–24 percent have strong family communication or a feeling of being valued by their community. Researchers suggest the following actions to help young people build these assets.

ACTIVITIES

HOW TO...

INCREASE POSITIVE FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Parents

- Be available whenever and wherever your kids want to talk. If you are in the middle of something, arrange a time when you can talk soon.
- Never label a child's opinions, beliefs, feelings or experiences as silly, stupid, childish or wrong.
- Ask your kids every day about what they are doing and thinking, and tell them about your day too.
- Spend one hour a week with each child individually.
- The fewer topics you declare "off limits," the more your kids will talk to you. If you don't know the answer to a question, help your kids find it.
- Ask your child's opinion about something important.

Educators

- Weave conversations with parents into homework assignments. Example: Ask students to interview their parents about what they were doing during a period of recent history you are studying.
- Give parents handouts and brochures that provide information and suggestions on responding to sensitive or tough questions (e.g., teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, alcohol and drug abuse, etc.)
- Help students develop a vocabulary for their feelings. Use posters, films and literature to explore feelings and ways to express them.

Community members

- Sponsor activities that bring youth and their families together. Build in time for conversation.
- Offer workshops and community meetings on topics of concern to your community. Invite experts to speak on ways to communicate with kids of all ages.

INCREASE FEELINGS OF WORTH IN THE COMMUNITY

Parents

- Involve your children in family decisions. Ask for their input and advice. Take their interests, talents and opinions seriously.
- Ask your children to help you plan family reunions, family outings or neighborhood gatherings.
- Ask your child to teach you something—current slang, a hobby, a song, a skill, etc.

Educators

- Teach youth how to positively exert their influence in the community. Teach them specific social action skills including telephoning, surveying, polling and speech making.
- Give student councils real authority over some important school issues.
- Let students choose independent study projects or report topics to make them active planners in their own education.
- Empower teens by teaching them how to teach others. Have older students tutor, read to, or develop mentor relationships with younger students. Offer extra credit to youth who teach other students.

Community members

- Include young people in neighborhood and community boards/councils. Give them opportunities to take leadership roles and make real contributions.
- Hire youth when appropriate. Example: You might hire students to serve as election judges or to create and update city and community Web pages.
- Publicize volunteer programs and opportunities for young people.

Tips for Success

GETTING STARTED

NEXT STEPS

Reach out to people from all sectors of the community.

Start with a positive vision, rather than simply responding to a crisis.

Survey young people on their needs and concerns.*

Work with existing programs and institutions—don't waste energy starting new ones!

Repeat key messages about asset building to ensure there is community-wide understanding.

Celebrate early successes, no matter how small.

Look to the community for new ideas and innovations.

Learn from communities that are farther along down the road—don't reinvent the wheel.**



SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

CALLING ALL YOUNG PEOPLE!

Asset building is a joint venture between youth and adults. While adults are responsible for laying the foundation with funding, programs and personnel, it is youth who are ultimately responsible for recognizing and seizing the opportunities around them. The quiz below will you look at what you are doing to build your own future and the future of other young people.

When was the last time you...

- Took advantage of challenging opportunities through youth programs and through school and congregational activities?
- Built relationships with younger kids through service projects, volunteering, tutoring, baby-sitting and other opportunities?
- Talked to your peers or to adults about how to create an environment that is good for young people?
- Created a useful role for yourself, instead of waiting to be given one?
- Got to know an adult you admire?

* Adapted from "Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth: A National Initiative of Search Institute to Unite Communities for Children and Adolescents," Search Institute, 1998.

* A survey instrument is available from Search Institute for this purpose. See Resources, page 8.

** Ideas and networking opportunities are available through upcoming Prevention Extension workshops on these topics. See Resources, page 8.

ASSET BUILDING

Search Institute

RESOURCES

<http://www.search-institute.org>
 1.800.888.7828

Search Institute offers a wealth of information to communities. Here is a sampling:

Assets: The Magazine for Ideas for Healthy Communities and Healthy Youth

Published quarterly by Search Institute, this magazine is filled with stories, strategies, and other practical information to support asset-building efforts in communities and organizations.

Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (Youth Survey Instrument)

This survey instrument helps communities gather data about assets. For information on conducting the survey in your community, contact the survey services coordinator at Search Institute, 1.800.888.7828.

3:00 to 6:00 pm: Programs for Young Adolescents

This publication provides a sampling of high-quality after-school programs that address key developmental needs of 10- to 15-year olds. By Leah M. Lefstein and Joan Lipsitz, republished by Search Institute in 1995.

New Prevention Extension Workshops

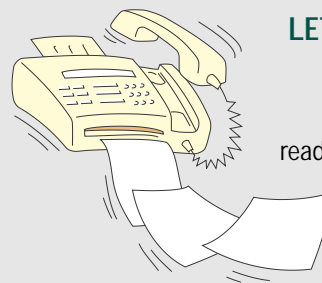
The Prevention Extension will be presenting "From Risk to Resilience: Inside-Out Prevention," a new training workshop by Bonnie Benard on April 14 in Santa Cruz County and April 15 in San Benito County. A workshop on Asset Building is currently under development. For more information, contact The EMT Group at www.emt.org or call 916.983.6680.

SOURCES

Search Institute (Feb 1994). "Building Assets for Youth." *Youth Update*.

Peter L. Benson (1997). *All Kids Are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring Responsible Children and Adolescents*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Peter L. Benson, Judy Galbraith and Pamela Espeland (1998). *What Kids Need To Succeed*. Free Spirit Publishing.



LET'S HEAR FROM YOU!

We welcome readers' comments on topics presented. Call us at 916.983.6680, fax us at 916.983-6693, or send an email to erica@emt.org

prevention
Tactics

is published periodically by The EMT Group, Inc., under its Community Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention contract with DADP. The purpose of this publication is to help practitioners in the prevention field stay abreast of best practices emerging from current research and to provide practical tools and resources for implementing proven strategies.

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