

The Power of Assets

Today across the nation hundreds of communities are asking what they can do to strengthen young people's foundations and develop a stronger infrastructure for them. Too few young people grow up experiencing key ingredients for their healthy development. They do not experience support from adults, build relationships across generations, or hear consistent messages about boundaries and values. The result is that communities and the nation are overwhelmed with the problems and needs in the lives of youth. Today the real challenge is to shift our thinking to a new approach—one that addresses deeper causes and needs.

If we only look at the problems of the at-risk behaviors of the youth in our community, it is all too easy to become paralyzed by the overwhelming magnitude of the problems. On the other hand, if we look at the assets within our community and build on those strengths, research tells us, the at-risk behaviors will decrease. This becomes more evident when we examine the research from the Search Institutes model of asset development. The Search Institute has spent the last 25 years examining what helps create resilient youth. They asked the question, why do some children who come from the same neighborhood, seem to thrive while others end up having serious problems. The answers are not simple. Today we are constantly bombarded with messages about problems facing our children and youth: failure in school, violence, alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy and suicide, among others. And we have invested a lot of time and considerable expense in trying to fix these problems. We have taken a “problem solving approach” to reduce or control risky behavior through intervention programs, and when the problem becomes too severe, incarceration or other punishments are implemented. Some of these

strategies have been effective, but at the same time they often treat only one aspect of the problem and neglect the cause.

By focusing on problems only, we make some repairs but it does not allow us to reinvent how we treat children and youth. Our history suggests that these measures, while certainly well intentioned have not been able to keep up with the tremendous challenges we are facing today. We see little progress and are discouraged and often disillusioned.

The Search Institutes model of asset building holds a great deal of promise. It is an approach that taps into the caring, creative energies of families, neighborhoods, schools, congregations, work places and youth organizations. With this approach you don't begin with the problems. It starts by asking the larger question, what do you people need to navigate successfully through infancy, childhood, and adolescence? The answer, from the Search Institutes research is a set of essential building blocks that all young people need called developmental assets.

The Search Institute has identified 40 such developmental assets, ranging from having caring neighborhoods and schools to knowing how to resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways. The assets model gives us a common language to understand and talk about what children and youth need. The more assets children and youth have the stronger they become, and the more likely they are to live productive, happy adult lives. When drawn together, these assets are powerful shapers of young peoples behavior. The Asset model empowers us to become proactive and provides us with a framework where problems are more manageable and an attitude of vision, hope and celebration pervades community life.