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Developmental Assets and Developmental Relationships

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This entry describes the positive youth development theoretical and research frameworks of developmental assets and developmental relationships. The field of practice and research known as positive youth development is a relatively recent approach for understanding how youth successfully develop. It emerged over the last 30 years and has become a vital force in shaping the study of adolescence. Several features make positive youth development distinctive from the approaches that came before (a) a focus on young people's strengths and not their deficits; (b) an emphasis on what we want to promote in, with, and for young people, not only on what we want to prevent; (c) an ecological perspective that considers not only what is going on inside young people but how young people's relations with their families, schools, peers, and communities influence them; (d) a commitment to viewing youth as resources and active shapers of their own development and the environments they inhabit, not simply as reactors to their environment; and (e) a belief in young people's capacity to change.

These shifts in perspective from preventing youth problems to the promotion of youth thriving have led to the articulation of several theoretical and applied frameworks for guiding research, policies, and programs around youth development. Among these are the risk and protective factors framework of the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington, the 5 Cs approach promulgated by the Forum for Youth Investment and by Richard Lerner and colleagues at Tufts University, the Five Promises framework of America's Promise Alliance, and the developmental assets framework created by Search Institute. Over the last 25 years, the developmental assets framework has become the world's most widely cited approach to positive youth development. It has been used to shape youth policy and programming in more than 60 countries other than the United States, through collaborations with international relief organizations such as World Vision International and Save the Children, and within the United States, to influence the programming perspectives of national systems such as the YMCA of the USA, Salvation Army, and Boys and Girls Clubs, and coalitions of healthy youth development in more than 700 communities and more than 10,000 schools and districts.

The Developmental Assets Framework

The assets framework names 20 *external* developmental relationships and opportunities youth need in their environment, and 20 *internal* values, skills, and self-perceptions young people need to gradually develop as they become self-regulating. The external assets are grouped into four categories of support (e.g., positive family communication, a caring school climate), empowerment (e.g., safety, chances to serve others), boundaries and expectations (e.g., rules and limits in the family, school, and neighborhood; positive adult role models), and constructive use of time (e.g., participation in out-of-school activities, participation in creative activities). The internal assets are likewise grouped into four categories of commitment to learning (e.g., achievement motivation, school engagement), positive values (e.g., caring, responsibility), social competencies (e.g., interpersonal communication skills, cultural competence), and positive identity (e.g., personal power or self-efficacy, sense of purpose).

Since the framework was introduced in 1990, developmentally appropriate variations have been created for early childhood, middle childhood, and young adulthood (all accessible from www.search-institute.org). Several surveys have been developed to measure youth self-reports of the assets they experience (or for parent/caregiver reports on children younger than age 8). One survey measures each of the individual 40 assets and is relatively lengthy. Another, the Developmental Assets Profile, is much briefer, measuring not the individual asset

but the eight asset categories (and five environmental contexts or settings, such as family, school, and community). A third, the Emergency Developmental Assets Profile, is just 13 items and is meant for use solely in emergency or crisis settings. For example, it has been employed with young refugees from armed conflict in the Middle East and from typhoon-ravaged areas of the Philippines.

Data from these surveys have been collected from more than 5 million young people around the world. Across life stages, historical time periods over the last 25 years, cultures, languages, literacy levels, and demographic makeup of the samples (gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status), we have found consistently that the more developmental assets young people experience, the better off they are on nearly every outcome studied, whether academic (e.g., grades at school), civic (e.g., volunteering), psychological (e.g., depression), social-emotional (positive emotions), or behavioral (e.g., substance use). This pattern is seen for cross-sectional studies (current asset level predicts current well-being) and longitudinal studies (current asset level predicts subsequent well-being). For example, the more developmental assets students have in middle school, the more likely they are to have B+ or higher GPAs several years later in high school. In addition, young people who increase their assets over time are found to increase in measures of positive outcomes.

Of course, developmental assets are not all young people need to be healthy, responsible, contributing, and satisfied with their lives. No amount of emphasis on relationships, values, and self-perceptions can guarantee youths' success at overcoming toxins of societies including racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, illiteracy, war, terrorism, and violence. The assets approach focuses on more immediately changeable aspects of young people's social, emotional, and psychological environment, without ignoring the necessity of broader social action for equity of opportunity.

The heart of the developmental assets framework and indeed, of all of the primary approaches to positive youth development theory, research, and practice, has always been the *quality of the relationships* young people experience: *Youths' relationships are the principal source of all the assets.*

The measurement of those relationships in the assets framework has included the extent to which youth are provided care and support and the extent to which they are provided both expectations for behavior and challenges to stretch and grow. However, given that relationships are conceived as the central source of positive development, the existing concepts and measures of relationships in the assets framework were not in-depth or specific enough for either comprehensive research or program development in the 21st century.

The Developmental Relationships Framework

Therefore, during the last several years, Search Institute has built on this extensively researched relational base of the assets framework to elaborate further what high-quality relationships look like and to create measures for studying those relationships. The new assets-based framework that has emerged, the developmental relationships framework, was produced after extensive literature review, focus groups, interviews, and pilot studies. It includes the traditional actions of care, support, and challenge described in the developmental assets approach, but adds both significant depth to those measures, and two additional actions that are important within relationships: expanding youths' possibilities and sharing power, influence, and decisions with them. Thus, the developmental relationships framework is a descendant of 25 years of research with the developmental assets framework

but sharpens the focus on the key element of the assets approach by naming specifically what *happens* in *positive* relationships—five essential actions for promoting positive youth development:

- express care,
- provide support,
- challenge youth to grow,
- share power with them, and
- expand their possibilities.

Research with a national sample of parenting adults and children ages 3–13 showed that, just as for the developmental assets, young people who experience more of these actions in developmental relationships are better off academically, psychologically, social–emotionally, and behaviorally. For example, *developmental relationships are 10 times more predictive than demographics are of character strengths such as responsibility and perseverance*. This replicates another consistent finding that developmental assets are much more influential than demographics for most youth outcomes. And the two actions not measured in the assets framework, expand possibilities and, especially, share power, appear to be the most influential of the five actions. This suggests that the developmental relationships framework, while building on and extending the application of the assets approach, is bringing a fresh value-add to research that has new implications for strengthening youth programs and policy. Beyond this national study of developmental relationships in families, studies are planned of developmental relationships among students, teachers, and other school adults, youth and adults in out-of-school programs, and youth with their peers.

The developmental assets framework has been highly influential around the world in research, policy, and program development for children, youth, and young adults over the last 25 years. Its evolutionary kin, the new developmental relationships framework, appears to have similar potential, while honing in even more on the most critical—and *malleable*—aspect of the assets approach, the quality of relationships young people have with adults and peers. Together, the developmental assets and developmental relationships frameworks are prime examples of how theory and research can be utilized worldwide across great diversities to make meaningful differences in the day-to-day lives and future prospects of young people from preschool through college.

See also [Adolescence](#); [Close Relationships](#); [Contexts of Development](#); [Developmental Science](#); [Interpersonal Relationships](#); [Positive Youth Development](#)

- developmental assets
- assets
- positive for youth
- positive development
- youth
- young people
- Search Institute

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Further Readings

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