

Building Assets Among Youth in the Coulee Region

In the Coulee Region and throughout the U.S., youth face challenges that compromise their ability to develop as healthy and whole people. Some of the demands are not new to adolescence: peer pressure, questions of identity and belongingness. Other struggles seem to belong to more recent generations. High rates of divorce and family instability, increased levels of stress and obesity, funding pressures on schools, and increased levels of violence and harassment are only some of the issues with which youth must contend. Yet, many youth are thriving. What helps youth to succeed in this challenging time?

This question has guided the Search Institute for more than a decade. Instead of studying the deficiencies in youth, this Minnesota research group looks for the strengths that lead to healthy youth development. The findings consistently reveal that the number of relationships, skills, values, and experiences youth have determines how successful youth will be in making positive choices in their lives.

Specifically, the Institute's researchers developed a list of factors, or assets, that enhance youth development. In surveys of over 1 million youth in hundreds of communities, the Search Institute found that youth who had more assets also had much happier, healthier lives, as compared to those who had fewer assets. Underlying all assets is the idea that adults and, ultimately the entire community must nurture youth. By encouraging youth to initiate caring relationships with adults and involvement with their communities, youth can build assets in their own lives. This research provides a way of understanding both the problems youth face and the successes youth have. Perhaps more importantly, the research suggests approaches and strategies that individuals, families, organizations, and whole communities can take to enhance healthy youth development.

The Search Institute has identified 40 assets that enhance youth development (see attached list). The first 20 developmental assets focus on positive experiences that young people receive from the people and institutions in their lives. These assets are referred to as **External Assets**. The four categories of external assets include 1) **Support** - young people need to experience support, care, and love from their families, neighbors, and many others. They need organizations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments; 2) **Empowerment** - young people need to be valued by their community and have opportunities to contribute to others. For this to occur, they must be safe and feel secure; 3) **Boundaries and Expectations** - young people need to know what is expected of them and whether activities and behaviors are "in bounds" or "out of bounds"; and 4) **Constructive use of time** - young people need constructive, enriching opportunities for growth through creative activities, youth programs, congregational involvement, and quality time at home.

A community's responsibility for its youth does not end with the provision of external assets. Nurturing the internal qualities that guide choices and create a sense of purpose and focus is also critical. The other 20 developmental assets are referred to as **Internal Assets**. The four categories of internal assets include 1) **Commitment to learning** – youth need to develop a lifelong commitment to education and learning; 2) **Positive values** - youth need to develop strong values that guide their choices; 3) **Social competencies** - young people need skills and competencies that equip them to make positive choices, to build relationships, and to succeed in life; and 4) **Positive identity** - young people need a strong sense of their own power, purpose, worth, and promise.

While the assets are powerful shapers of young people’s lives and choices, too few youth experience enough of these assets. The average youth surveyed by the Search Institute experiences only 18 of the 40 assets. In short, most young people in the United States lack many of the basic building blocks of healthy development.

Numerous school districts in the Coulee Region have assessed their students’ assets using the survey *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors*. In 2000, students in Crawford and Grant counties completed the survey; in 2001, students in Viroqua Area Schools completed the survey; and in 2002, students in the School District of La Crosse completed the survey. A total of 3,782 area youth participated in this research contributing significantly to our understanding of local youth experiences.

A sampling of survey findings include:

	Schools in Crawford & Grant Counties (Grades 6-12)	Viroqua Area Schools (Grades 6, 7, 9, & 11)	School District of La Crosse (Grades 6, 8, 10, & 12)
Average Number of Assets Youth Report	18.5	20.2	19.8
% of Youth Who Experience 31-40 Assets	8%	13%	11%
Examples of External Assets: (% reporting yes)			
<u>Community Values Youth:</u> young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.	24%	23%	24%
<u>Positive Family Communication:</u> young person and his/her parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek parent(s’) advice & counsel.	26%	31%	29%
<u>Youth Programs:</u> young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at schools and/or in community.	60%	63%	59%
Examples of Internal Assets: (% reporting yes)			
<u>Planning and Decision-Making:</u> young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.	26%	31%	34%
<u>Personal Power:</u> young person feels he/she has control over “things that happen to me”.	37%	38%	44%
<u>Responsibility:</u> young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.	62%	68%	66%

This information gives us many important insights into the external and internal lives of youth. Most notably, youth possess only half of the necessary assets that contribute to successful development. Only one quarter of youth feel they are valued by adults. Clearly, our youth do not have the connections, relationships, perceptions, and experiences that are critical in their journey toward adulthood.

The good news is that everyone can build assets. Families, schools, social service agencies, and other institutions have important roles. However, everyone has a part to play in building assets with the youth in your family, neighborhood, community, or place of business. None of the assets identified by the Search Institute are capital intensive. The return on our personal commitment to our youth is without measure. To help people think about the range of possible asset-building acts, the Search Institute has outlined these six principles:

- **Everyone can build assets.** Building assets isn't just about great families or schools or neighborhoods. It's about each person playing a role in the raising of our children.
- **All young people need assets.** While it is crucial to pay special attention to youth who struggle—economically, emotionally, or otherwise—nearly all young people need more assets than they have.
- **Relationships are key.** Strong relationships between adults and youth, youth and their peers, and teenagers and children are central to asset building. Adults need to make youth feel valued.
- **Asset building is an ongoing process.** Building assets starts when a child is born and continues through high school and beyond.
- **Consistent messages are important.** It is critical for families, schools, communities, media, and others to give youth consistent and similar messages about what is important and what is expected of them.
- **Intentional redundancy is important.** Assets must be continually reinforced across the years and in all areas of a young person's life.

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References:

Couleecap Facts, 2002.

Developmental Assets: An Overview, Search Institute, 2002.

Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth – Participating Schools in Crawford and Grant Counties, Search Institute, 2000.

Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth – Viroqua Area Schools, Search Institute, 2001.

Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth – School District of La Crosse, 2002.

The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets

Asset Type	Asset Name	Asset Definition
EXTERNAL ASSETS:		
Support	1. Family support	Family life provides high levels of love and support.
	2. Positive family communication	Young person and his or her parents(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parent(s).
	3. Other adult relationships	Young person receives support from 3 or more non-parent adults.
	4. Caring neighborhood	Young person experiences caring neighbors.
	5. Caring school climate	School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
Empowerment	6. Parent involvement in schooling	Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
	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 1 hour or more per week.
	10. Safety	Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.
Boundaries and Expectations	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 parents(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.
Constructive Use of Time	17. Creative activities	Young person spends 3 or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
	18. Youth programs	Young person spends 3 or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.
	19. Religious community	Young person spends 1 hour or more 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	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 1 hour of homework every school day.
	24. Bonding to school	Young person cares about his or her school.
	25. Reading for pleasure	Young person reads for pleasure 3 or more hours per week.
Positive Values	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 his or her beliefs.
	29. Honesty	Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy."
	30. Responsibility	Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
Social Competencies	31. Restraint	Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
	32. Planning & 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	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 his or her personal future.