

## SEARCH Institute's Asset Approach: Protecting Youth through Community Collaboration

### Courtney Garland

A report on school drop-out rates, juvenile arrests, teenage pregnancies, and youth alcohol consumption set the stage for the Healthy Community Healthy Youth Symposium that was held recently in Champaign, Illinois. The symposium focused on what communities, families, and individuals can do to prevent delinquency. According to symposium speaker Dr. Donald Draayer from the Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a new method that focuses on creating and maintaining external and internal support structures for youth—the Asset Approach—shows promise.

The Search Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping parents, adolescents, schools, and communities work together to promote positive youth development. Draayer noted that Search Institute research shows that instilling assets can create concrete, positive experiences and qualities that will have a positive influence on young people's lives.

The theory of the Asset Approach is that certain internal and external assets can help children grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. External assets are specific support systems found in a child's environment. They range from giving children useful roles in the community to parents and other adults modeling positive responsible behavior. Internal assets help children develop inner strength such as self-control and a strong value system. These assets include motivation in a child to accomplish goals, the ability to stand up for their beliefs, and the ability to resolve conflict nonviolently.

The Search Institute believes that asset building can protect youth from high-risk behavior as well as promote positive behavior. Asset building may be helpful in counteracting the messages children receive from the marketplace that challenge values

needed for healthy and safe behavior. For instance, the glamorization of alcohol consumption can lead young people to believe that drinking will make them popular or that alcohol will provide an escape from life's worries, when, on the contrary, it can lead to dependency and loneliness. To counteract the glamorization of risky behaviors, community leaders are encouraged to reach children through a series of basic principles:

- Focus on all youth—the good and the bad.
- Accent positive youth by using their efforts as an example for others.
- Maximize potential development in youth by asking what children need in their lives.
- Share the responsibility and commitment to youth among the entire community.

By promoting assets in youth, communities can increase the chance that young people will have positive attitudes and behaviors. Draayer says that giving kids an internal guidance structure that promotes their assets will help them make better decisions, and instilling assets will protect them from risky behaviors, promote good behavior, and prepare them for the challenges they will face. The following guidelines focus on the building blocks of the Asset Approach:

- In empowering children, recognize that they change and will need someone to reach out to for support. Make sure a positive adult is available. This person may be a coach, family member, counselor, or friend.
- Every child needs to feel significant—give children responsibilities to make them feel important and included.

- Set boundaries and expectations. Be there when children need adults most. Between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m., many children are home alone. This time of day is when children engage in the most self-destructive activities. By facilitating supervised activities, adults can intervene and establish positive influential relationships during crucial periods.
- Demonstrate social competencies, such as decision-making skills, empathy, sensitivity toward others, cultural respect, and resistance to negative peer pressure.
- Encourage parents to communicate with their children, inquiring about what's important in their child's life.
- Promote a positive school climate by making sure every student is known well, feels important, and contributes to the school environment in his or her unique way.
- Encourage all parts of the community, such as the media, businesses, and religious organizations, to collaborate to build external assets within the community.

To prevent risky behavior and promote healthy, safe behavior, communities may want to know how they can implement asset building. The Search Institute suggests that community members identify their role in supporting youth in the community. For example, an individual may choose to become a mentor for a youngster, while a youth organization may choose to expand its youth activities during the critical after-school hours. A local business may decide to develop interesting internships that would integrate work-related skills with academics.

The Search Institute notes that community leaders with a vested interest in uniting their community may not have to create new organizations to implement asset building because many of these activities may already be taking place. Instead, they can establish a task force of community leaders who can track each group's activities and then mobilize these groups to analyze their strengths and weaknesses. The task

force can maintain the interest of the community by acknowledging the accomplishments of members who are already making an impact, spreading the word that these efforts have true rewards.

## For More Information

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Robertson, Anne S. (1997). Building a healthy community. *Parent News* [Online], 3(1). Available: <http://npin.org/pnews/pnew197/pnew197c.html>

Robertson, Anne S. (1996). Creating a drug-free community. *Parent News* [Online], 2(11). Available: <http://npin.org/pnews/pnewn96/pnewn96g.html>

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