

Building a Healthy Community

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“What makes a healthy community for children and adolescents?” is a question that Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., examines daily in his work at the Search Institute in Minneapolis. In his recent article “Beyond the Village Rhetoric,” he examines the implications of the popular “whole village” campaign. At one extreme, the public sector is viewed as responsible for the community’s youth; at the other extreme, the family is viewed as solely responsible for raising its children (Benson, 1996).

Both families and communities, along with the local, state, and federal government, are important for building an infrastructure that supports the healthy development of children. But in Dr. Benson’s opinion, what has been missed in the whole village discussion is a commitment to building the “developmental and relational foundation” that will assist with the development of adolescents (p. 3). He believes that this foundation calls for a new type of community investment and for new community programs.

To assist in developing a framework for healthy communities and programs, the Search Institute has been looking at community characteristics and their relationship to the development of the community’s young people. In 1990, the institute created a framework of “30 Developmental Assets,” both internal and external, which all youth need to grow into caring, competent adults. Recently, Search added 10 additional assets. Search has found that by increasing the number of positive attributes of a community, the lives of all those residing in the area will improve. Some of these attributes include (40 Developmental Assets, 1996, p. 11):

- External Assets
 - Family support
 - Caring school climate
 - Community values youth
 - Neighborhood boundaries
 - Positive peer influence
 - Creative activities
 - Internal Assets
 - Achievement motivation
 - Bonding to school
 - Reading for pleasure
 - Honesty
 - Responsibility
 - Sense of purpose
- Other professionals in the human services profession are also working to develop successful programs within communities to serve the needs of families and youth. Lisbeth B. Schorr has looked at a broad spectrum of model programs in health, education, and welfare. In her book *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage*, Ms. Schorr assesses some common elements that seem to be fundamental to successful community programs (Schorr, 1989, pp. 256-259). These programs:
- *Offer a broad spectrum of services.* They are able to link emotional and social support for families with food, housing, or employment assistance, or with something else that the family may need, such as antibiotics.
 - *Cross traditional boundaries.* Successful programs regularly reach across professional or bureaucratic boundaries to meet human needs.
 - *Allow for flexible program structures.* Staff members have more freedom to exercise their own judgment to meet the individual needs of families.
 - *See the child in relation to the family and the family in relation to the community.* Parents

and professionals are mobilized to work together and make use of the services available.

- *Respect the client.* The staff at the program are able to establish trust and solid personal relationships with the clients.
- *Provide easy-to-use, coherent services.* A small, committed team frequently provides long-term follow-through for individual needs.
- *Adapt or circumvent traditional boundaries.* At least one staff member takes responsibility for seeing that the child and family needs are met. No one says “this is not my job.”
- *Demonstrate the ability to redefine their role to respond to the needs of the client.* Staff members shape their role and delivery of services around the community and clients they are serving.

By using benchmarks such as the 40 developmental assets, a community can begin to expand the foundation that supports its youth. Those assets might then be combined with the characteristics of effective programs to encourage specific development in needy areas.

One example of an initiative that is working to build its resources for children is Children First, located in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. Using the 40 developmental assets, a 30-member vision team guided the initiative, which included residents, schools, families, congregations, and other community organizations. Every effort was made to develop the capacity of existing professionals and programs towards shared responsibility. Some of the actions include having (Creating Healthy Communities, 1996):

- the high school girls basketball team read books to children at the public library on Saturday morning,
- the adults wait with the children for school buses, insuring their safety and building relationships,
- the school volunteers coordinate training in assets information for all volunteers.

When the whole community increases its awareness and links it with positive action, then communities such as St. Louis Park find that the support for all its children increases.

For more information about program development:

Search Institute: <http://www.search-institute.org>
 Telephone: 1-800-888-7828
 E-mail: assets@search-institute.org
 (Contact the institute for a free copy of *Assets: The Magazine of Ideas for Healthy Youth.*)

The 40 Developmental Assets: <http://www.search-institute.org/assets/>

CHILDREN FIRST

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Sources

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