



Toward Asset-Building Approaches

A resource of *Inspired to Serve: Youth-Led Interfaith Action*, a collaborative project of Search Institute and Interfaith Youth Core with support from Learn and Serve America.
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What is asset building?

Asset building is a research-based approach to working with children and youth that focuses on cultivating the relationships, opportunities, skills, values, and commitments they need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. It is based on Search Institute's framework of 40 Developmental Assets (see box).

Why is asset building important?

Studies of about 2.5 million young people in the United States show that the more assets young people have, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors and the more likely they are to thrive.

Assets have power for all young people, regardless of their gender, economic status, family, race/ethnicity, or religious commitment. However, the average young person surveyed experiences fewer than half of the 40 assets.

Being intentional about building assets ensures that service-learning efforts not only meet community needs, but contribute to young people's social, emotional, and spiritual growth.

What makes asset building effective?

- Focus on *strengths, not problems or deficits*. Asset building recognizes that young people are resources to their communities, not problems to be fixed or pushed aside. It emphasizes identifying and building on the resources of a community, its faith institutions, and its young people.
- Recognize that *young people are resources* for asset building, and their involvement as leaders is vital. Asset building happens with and for young people, since *all young people* benefit from having more assets in their lives.
- *Everyone can build assets*, not just professionals. Asset builders can include young people, parents, extended family members, youth workers, neighbors, and teachers.
- *Assets are built through relationships* across generations, within families, and among peers. Being intentional about cultivating meaningful, sustained relationships (rather than just participating in a program) is essential to asset building.

40 Developmental Assets

Support

1. Family support
2. Positive family communication
3. Other adult relationships
4. Caring neighborhood
5. Caring school climate
6. Parent involvement in schooling

Empowerment

7. Community values youth
8. Youth as resources
9. Service to others
10. Safety

Boundaries & expectations

11. Family boundaries
12. School boundaries
13. Neighborhood boundaries
14. Adult role models
15. Positive peer influence
16. High expectations

Constructive use of time

17. Creative activities
18. Youth programs
19. Religious community
20. Time at home

Commitment to learning

21. Achievement motivation
22. School engagement
23. Homework
24. Bonding to school
25. Reading for pleasure

Positive values

26. Caring
27. Equality and social justice
28. Integrity
29. Honesty
30. Responsibility
31. Restraint

Social competencies

32. Planning and decision making
33. Interpersonal competence
34. Cultural competence
35. Resistance skills
36. Peaceful conflict resolution

Positive identity

37. Personal power
38. Self-esteem
39. Sense of purpose
40. Positive view of personal future

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- **Asset building is an ongoing process**, with each stage of life building on previous experiences. Young people’s assets need to be reaffirmed, reshaped, and rediscovered as they grow up.
- **Consistent, mutually reinforcing messages** are key. Young people need to hear repeatedly that they are valued and expected to contribute at home, at school, in their congregation, and in the community. This consistency requires cultivating shared vision, values, and expectations among stakeholders.

How do I get started?

- **Engage youth as resources for asset building.** Rely on their experiences to shape your efforts.
- Individually or in a group setting, **reflect on your own experiences.** Where have some of the assets been important in your own life (even if you didn’t call them assets)? How have they made a difference? What kinds of experiences have you had that, in retrospect, built assets?
- **Focus on the relationships** in your network or program. Ensure that youth and adults who participate have intentional time to get to know each other and to form lasting relationships.
- **Don’t get overwhelmed with “40.”** Remember that no program or activity can, by itself, build all 40 assets. The goal is for many places in young people’s lives to focus on building these strengths. Start by either focusing on the categories (support, empowerment, etc.) or identifying those assets that you can most directly impact through your program or activity.
- **Use the asset framework to assess what you’re already doing.** One way to do this is to ask simple questions related to the eight categories of assets (support, empowerment, etc.). For example, you might ask, “In what ways do young people feel supported and cared for when they participate?” And “How does this program or activity intentionally nurture positive, shared values?”
- **Use the asset framework to develop future activities.** Again, a simple way to begin planning is to look at the asset categories (or specific assets, if you choose) and set goals and activities that intentionally focus on those assets.
- **Link with others who are doing asset building (or could be resources for asset building).** Assets can be built in families, schools, faith communities, neighborhoods, youth organizations, and other places where young people spend time. Find out if people there are intentionally building assets. Link with them, and intentionally invite others to consider the framework. This networking can serve as a foundation for shared learning and mutually reinforcing asset-building efforts across the community.

What other resources can help me?

Print and Video Resources

- **The Asset Approach** (Search Institute)—This booklet gives an overview of the assets, their power, and practical ideas for getting started.
- **Building Assets in Congregations** (Search Institute)—A detailed guide for applying asset building in faith communities.
- **Building Assets Together** (Search Institute)—This collection of group activities and worksheets can be used with youth groups and networks to promote dialogue about specific assets among young people. These can be used as part of reflection time throughout service-learning projects.

Web Site

- **Search Institute** (www.search-institute.org)—This site contains lots of information on the Developmental Assets. The “faith communities” section includes tips and ideas for applying asset building in interfaith networks as well as churches, mosques, synagogues, and other congregations.