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Creating Communities of Strength: Positive Youth Development is Prevention

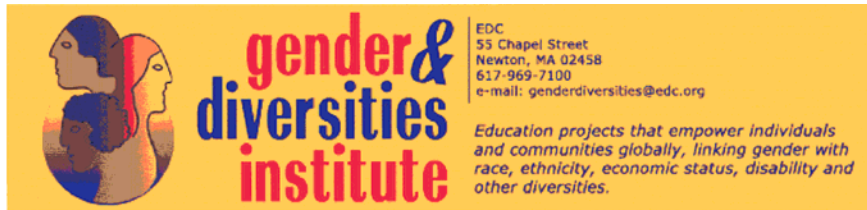
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Children and adolescents are growing up in the United States with increasingly complex lives. Central to their development is the role adults will assume in their lives. How can adults intentionally strengthen their relationships with children and teens? How can adults present their lives as examples for youth? Can a single model of positive youth development be applicable to all youth and families across the broad spectrum of race and ethnicity in our country? And finally, can the strengthening of these relationships play a role in preventing violence?

These have been compelling questions for community leaders, workers, and parents engaged in the practice of developing sustained family and community engagement, particularly towards the goal of violence prevention. Central to creating this engagement is work based on the 40 assets (40 elementos fundamentales). The framework of developmental assets emerged from research conducted by Search Institute, a national non-profit organization based in the United States. The 40 developmental assets comprise the positive relationships, skills, opportunities, and values that research has shown help young people to thrive. They are the building blocks needed in the lives of young people so that they may grow up to become the caring, compassionate adults that we would like them to be. The assets are both external – provided by families and others in the community – and internal – personal qualities or characteristics that young people develop. The average young person experiences only 18 of the 40 assets. While there exists some variability across communities and subgroups, youth in general are not experiencing enough of the 40 building blocks.

More than 500 communities have begun to adopt the asset framework in their community-based organizations, schools, state agencies, and community-wide. For the



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asset message to be most effective, it needs to be culturally inclusive, relevant across ethnicities, and respectful of the diverse approaches to nurturing a child.

Preventing Violence

These developmental assets have a direct relationship to violence prevention. Research data collected from 100,000 adolescents has demonstrated that assets have tremendous power to protect youth from many different harmful or unhealthy choices, one being violence. Youth that had 0-10 assets exhibited violence 61% of the time in the previous month, as compared to youth with 11-20 assets exhibiting violence 35% of the time. For youth with 21-30 assets this percentage goes down to 16% and youth with 31-40 assets, they engage in violent behavior only 6% of the time. So the percentage drops from 61% to 6% as the number of assets increase in the life of a young person.

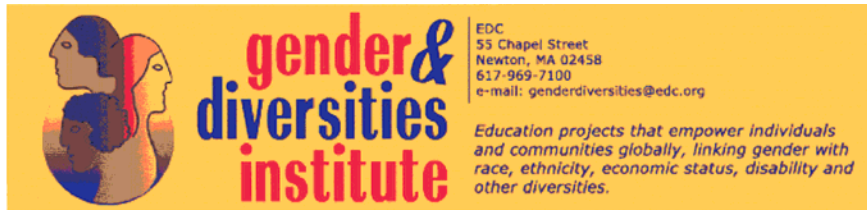
Strengthening Relationships

Sustained family engagement is based on the strength of relationships between adults and children. Building and nurturing the 40 assets in the lives of children and teens can assist them in making better decisions, choosing positive paths, and growing up to become responsible, compassionate and able adults. Building assets strengthens relationships. Stronger relationships support the building of assets and the reduction of violence in the lives of children and adolescents.

Asset-building Principles

- Everyone can be an asset builder. What are required are the consistent, repetitive messages that adults value youth and view youth as a resource.
- Asset building is a journey. It is a process that requires that individuals take small positive actions, continually, with children and teens alike.
- The 40 assets are common sense that has become uncommon behavior. Everyone has a role in making the 40 assets common behavior once again.

To this point, I remember when I shared the concept of the 40 assets with my own mother. She is now 76 years old, originally from Mexico; she has lived in the United States for over 45 years. I remember going into great detail, describing the assets to her and stories of how this framework is transforming families, organizations and communities. She listened very patiently and when I finished she asked what was new about this information. She shared that these 40 assets captured how she and my father



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had raised my five siblings and me. I agreed with her and affirmed that many on this list are common sense, unfortunately, I added, it has become uncommon behavior. Our goal now in communities throughout the U.S. is to make this list of common sense common behavior once again.

Connecting with Community

Cultural competence enhances the asset ownership process in communities of color such as in Latino and African American neighborhoods. By making a point of validating a person's culture, respecting roles and relationships, and drawing on specific cultural strengths, the asset message can become more accessible and meaningful. A related question then is how do children and adolescents develop and learn to embrace their own ethnic and cultural identity? Children, particularly children of color or ethnic minority children in the United States, learn about their ethnic and cultural identity primarily from the adults in their lives. For example, it may be couched in the language one uses, the cultural traditions shared, and the family stories that are passed down through generations. The concept and value of ethnic pride or ethnic shame is transmitted from adults to children, especially within communities of color.

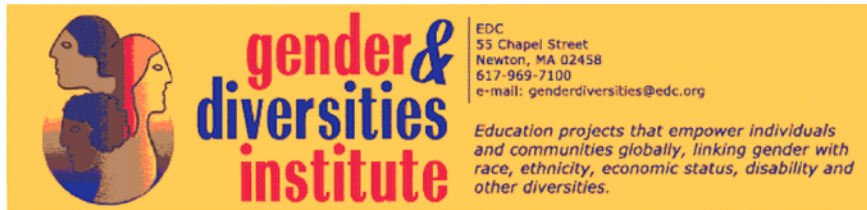
Role of Parents

Teenagers are then left with the quandary of making sense of all of this for themselves. For some, cultural and ethnic identity are central to self-identity. For others, fitting in and becoming part of the collective – ignoring differences and highlighting similarities – is what is most important. Every process is unique and personal. The more adults can support this identification process the better. Adults can serve as role models for discussing ethnicity and culture and can assist adolescents in figuring out the process.

Seven Habits of Culturally Competent Asset Builders

Individuals and organizations that link assets and cultural competence will become transformed by the experience. So what will distinguish these asset-building champions? What behaviors exemplify or go into building cultural competence? The seven habits of culturally competent asset-building champions serve as reminders of the work that lies ahead.

1. Name and honor your own cultural heritage.
2. Embrace and honor the diversity of others.



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3. Connect assets and culture often.
4. Speak of your own asset-building efforts through a cultural lens.
5. Include diverse perspectives in conversations that silently assume that one size fits all.
6. Be ready to learn by challenging one's own assumptions about other people.
7. Reflect on the journey.

Just as asset builders are learning to reach out and connect with youth, culturally competent individuals are learning to engage and connect with people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The process is similar and the results are equally as profound. Asset builders who make a conscious effort to give their support to a son or daughter are engaging in behavior similar to a culturally competent individual who asks a person to share the story of her or his cultural background. A combination of these efforts begins to build the relationships that can transform our social fabric and allow us to not only reduce violence but also to increase those building blocks that all young people need to succeed.