



EMBEDDING ASSET BUILDING PRACTICES INTO YOUR PROGRAMS

How the Developmental Assets® Framework can be helpful to your work:

Developmental Assets can be useful at all levels: individually, programmatically, and organizationally. Ideally the assets are integrated into your program design and the behaviors of staff, so that they form the core of your organization’s culture. The asset framework can inform:

- Relationships – the interactions between program staff, volunteers, young people, parents, and other staff in your building: the “who” of your work with youth.
- Environment – the physical space you use and how it feels: the “where” of your work with youth.
- Program practices – activities, curriculum: the “what” of your work with youth.

The asset language is so efficient: it gives us common words to use when we talk about what is happening in the program and what we want to see happen. A common language helps us go to the heart of the matter with the staff, volunteers, and partner organizations. It also fosters communication with parents and helps in training staff and volunteers.

–Amy Fleske, Neighborhood Centers, Norman, Oklahoma, from the book, *More than Just a Place to Go*

Step 1: Build Awareness of the Developmental Asset Framework and Language

It is important that key players understand the Developmental Assets Framework, are involved in reflecting on how current program activities are already asset building, and are working to identify opportunities to deepen the asset-building potential of their program.

Many program staff say they are familiar with the Developmental Assets, but they struggle when asked to describe in concrete ways what they are doing to intentionally build a particular asset or to create an asset-rich environment. An introductory training is a good starting point but not sufficient to move asset building into routine behavior. Reflection and practice need to follow any initial training in order to move asset building in this direction.

NOTE: While young people ideally would have most (31-40) of the Developmental Assets in their lives, no one place can provide all of them. Families, schools, after school programs, neighbors, congregations, and a host of other community resources can play a role in providing or building these assets. Don’t expect that your program should build all or even a majority of the Developmental Assets. You can do your best work when you



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have identified the specific assets your program and staff are equipped to develop, and then you can deepen your intentional work on them.

Some of you have already documented the specific ways in which your program builds one or more of the Developmental Assets as you have worked on your logic models. However, you may have staff that did not participate in that process, or may want to revisit your asset building efforts from time to time. An easy place to start is to use the grid within this document which asks staff (and possibly volunteers and administrators) to review current practices. You can go a step further by reviewing all the specific entries you made on the handout and labeling them with an **R** (if you build those assets mostly through Relationships), a **P** (if you build those assets through your Program Practices), or an **E** (if you build those assets primarily through attention to the physical Environment in which your program takes place).

Going Deeper: Program Practices

Your program already has stated goals and objectives. In all likelihood you have a curriculum or set of activities that form the core of “what” you do. Much research has been done to identify programs and practices that lead to the positive outcomes you are aiming for, and you have received information about where to look for information on best practices and model programs today.

No matter whether your program has been chosen from an “approved list” of evidence-based programs or you have reviewed best practices and built your program around those practices, intentional asset building strategies and behaviors can enhance outcomes for the youth in your program.

As you review a potential curriculum package or look at your existing program documents, you can identify where they support asset building or are strength-based in their approach.

Also, the exercise in this document provides an opportunity to think about your starting point and what asset building practices are already in place.

In all likelihood you and your staff identified some actions related to Relationships, many related to Program Practices, and perhaps some related to Environment. Now we will look at how each of those can be enhanced.

Going Deeper: Relationships

Initial training for staff, volunteers, and young people about the Developmental Assets, is a good place to ground conversations about relationships. Many of us believe we have the skills to form relationships with young people. Some can actually describe the behaviors they use to do so, and fewer still have received any help in building specific skills that enhance relationships with young people.

Because a word like *relationship* is used so broadly, people can say they know what it means, but, in fact, people can have quite different understandings of what it looks like. Using descriptions of actual behaviors is one way to help all staff get on the same page.



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The following information contains a worksheet that staff can use to chart their interactions with one young person over the course of a week. The content of the worksheet can be used to inform a discussion between program staff at a staff meeting the following week.

Strength-based relationships matter between staff members as well. Being supportive and empowering, respecting boundaries, and utilizing social competencies are all behaviors we want to help young people develop. Modeling these behaviors is one way staff can help young people develop these assets. These behaviors also help create a more positive work environment for staff.



LEVELS OF RELATIONSHIPS AND INFLUENCE

Select *one* young person in your program with whom you have a relationship. Over the next week, use the tally sheet below to check yourself on the levels on which you have connected with that young person. Then identify what one additional action you could take to deepen that relationship in the upcoming week.

Levels of Relationships & Influence	Specific Actions I took this week with _____
1. Making Connections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By: smiling, waving, high-five, pat on the back, “good to see you”, “how’s your day?” etc. 	
2. Getting to Know Young People <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By: initiating conversations and finding out their interests, family information, pets, favorites, aspirations, nicknames, etc. 	
3. Identifying and Encouraging Young People’s Strengths and Talents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By: conversing with them, observing them, playing with them, looking closely at their work, listening to them, and by words of affirmation, writing notes, attending events, etc. 	
4. Challenging Young People <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By: having high expectations, issuing challenges, helping them set goals, using affirmations, checking in, etc. 	
5. Focusing on Building Specific Assets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By: developing a plan for building specific external assets and working with them directly on key internal assets 	
6. Maintaining Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By: sending a card or email, making a phone call, attending an event they are involved in, even after they have graduated from your program, etc. 	

Adapted from *Building Developmental Assets in School Communities*. Copyright ©Search Institute, 2004.



Discussion of worksheet:

At level one of the previous chart, adults are forming relationships when they take part in basic positive social interactions such as smiling, waving, or telling a young person they are glad to see them.

Each level identifies new actions that can help deepen the relationships staff have with young people in their programs.

While it is not expected that all staff will reach level six relationships with all students, it is reasonable to expect all staff to pay attention to the specific actions they take to build solid relationships with youth in their programs.

There will be times when relationships between a young person and a staff person don't seem to jell. In those situations, the role of the staff person may be to work on identifying some other caring adult (other staff person, volunteer, etc.) who could connect with that young person. Bringing other caring adults into the life of a young person is also an asset-building strategy.

Another way to look at staff behaviors that enhance the asset-building potential of programs:

An activity created by a YMCA in Canada had staff develop a simple grid. Using the grid, they identified (in the context of their program) the specific behaviors that fit in each of the four quadrants. A number of other programs have used this grid to create their own descriptive behavioral expectations for staff. While this can be done alone by supervisors, it is more powerful and useful if staff members participate in the conversation about what behaviors should be expected of them, and help to describe what Highly Effective, Effective, Needs Improvement, and Ineffective behaviors look like.

Staff should be reminded that the goal and expectation is to help staff move toward square three (Effective). Not everyone will be able to move to square four (Highly Effective) but it is good to identify what those behaviors are that go above and beyond "Effective."

Similarly, staff can be reminded that there is an expectation that no one stays in Square One. Behaviors identified as ineffective will not help the program achieve its goals or help young people develop.

NOTE: The behaviors identified in the chart that follows are examples from a particular setting. Be sure to identify the behaviors that are most relevant in your setting and to your particular program goals.



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Asset Building Behaviors for YMCA Leaders (Example)

<p>What to do Assists participants to develop confidence and self-esteem, resolve conflicts peacefully, build skills for communicating with others, and find ways to take care of their health and well-being.</p>	
<p>How to do it</p>	
<p>1 – Ineffective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Does not smile often. ○ Does not use names. ○ Frequently talks to other staff and volunteers, ignoring youth. ○ Does not communicate to youth about their accomplishments. ○ Does not encourage interaction between youth and others. ○ Excludes youth who do not or cannot participate. 	<p>3 - Effective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Smiles and laughs with youth. ○ Uses the names of many youth. ○ Gives youth opportunities for leadership. ○ Communicates to youth that they are proud of them. ○ Encourages interaction between youth and other adults. ○ Asks youth for feedback. ○ Ensures all youth are encouraged to participate in all activities.
<p>2 – Needs Improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Allows participants to take a leadership role or make choices if they ask. ○ Does not communicate to youth that they are proud of them. ○ Indifference displayed in regard to youth interaction. ○ Does not ask for feedback or opinions from youth. ○ Takes little notice of those who cannot or do not want to participate. 	<p>4 – Highly Effective</p> <p>In addition to the above “Effective” criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communicates to youth that they are proud of them in front of their families. ○ Provides time for youth to discover and form relationships. ○ Makes modifications to activities so all participants want/can participate in all activities.



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What to do	
How to do it	
1 – Ineffective	3 - Effective
2 – Needs Improvement	4 – Highly Effective



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Environment:

A number of studies identify physical safety as a critical attribute of a youth program setting. At the most basic level this means having the building and furnishings in good repair, maintaining a basic level of cleanliness, and assuring that students can get to and from the program safely.

Psychological safety is also a critical environmental component. Do young people know they will be treated fairly and equitably? Do they have opportunities to express their opinions and be heard? Is bullying and roughhousing tolerated, or are rules of behavior in place and consistently reinforced so all feel safe?

Engaging program participants in a discussion about the program space and how it should be used is a way to identify the factors that matter most to them, and offers a way to young people to develop a sense of shared ownership for their environment.

How have youth programs created a safe, positive and welcoming environment? Here are some examples:

- Post positive images and inspiring quotes on the walls
- Post artwork and other items created by program participants
- Ensure good traffic flow so it is easy (and safe) to move through the space
- Make spaces that youth can use for informal conversations
- Set up a suggestion box and post responses to suggestions
- Develop rules for behavior collaboratively and post them
- Post information about opportunities that might interest participants
- Ask youth to do a walk-through of the space and identify places that are most and least welcoming. Ask for suggestions to improve those spaces identified as least welcoming.

Further Resources:

The video, *More than Just a Place to Go*, created by Search Institute as a companion to the book by the same name, has been divided to form a five session self-study guide. It can be used with new staff or volunteers and can ensure that even someone joining the program staff mid-year can be brought up to speed on how they can be a part of building assets in youth.

The video is divided into five clips. The staff person or volunteer receives a booklet and is asked to view the clip and then use the accompanying worksheets to reflect on what they saw. In most cases they are then asked to go into their program and observe it for examples that represent the ideas from the video clip. Ideally, they then have a meeting to reflect and review their learning with a supervisor or experienced staff member.



The book, *More than Just a Place to Go*, was written to help programs become more deliberate about embedding asset-building practices into their work. A variety of checklists and worksheets, including a Youth Assessment are included in this publication.

Other tools for continuous improvement:

As staff members increase their ability to name the specific actions they are taking to build deeper relationships, you may want to use walk-throughs, activity observations, or other peer-to-peer evaluation strategies which can help them become more intentional in their actions.

Technical assistance is available through the *Getting to Outcomes for Maine* grant for programs wishing to go deeper in making their programs asset-rich.