

Healthy Communities ...Healthy Youth

It's just a matter of time!

by: Keith Pattinson

We're talking here about the personal time you and I spend — or don't spend — encouraging and supporting our communities and kids. It's about what's becoming increasingly apparent: that as a military operation, our current attack on the social ills facing children, youth and families is in disarray. Every day television, radio and the press remind us we're in retreat; that after decades of launching wars on violence, drugs, poverty, family breakdown and illiteracy, current research and a thoughtful citizenry tell us we have violence, drugs, poverty, family breakdown and illiteracy in abundance and it's destroying many of our kids and their families. As if that isn't discouraging enough, we seem to be running out of the ideas, energy and foot soldiers necessary to achieving success in any war. Our situation is somewhat akin to that of the World War II Canadian pilot whose aircraft plummeted to earth, leaving him the inglorious task of explaining the circumstances. In response to the question, "What caused your plane to crash?" he wrote, "I ran out of airspeed, altitude and ideas, simultaneously."

The bad news is that in our battle for social reform we're running out of airspeed and altitude at an alarming rate, particularly as it affects young people and their families; the good news is that there is a new idea out there that has little to do with what's going wrong and everything to do with what is or could be going right in communities throughout our province. It's called *Healthy Communities - Healthy Youth* and is the result of nearly ten years of research and work by the Search Institute of Minneapolis, Minnesota. It suggests that when you and I witness families and young people in difficulty in our communities, we are not innocent bystanders. And we can no longer hide behind the claim that we don't have kids, never had kids or that we've already got our own kids to worry about...because the kids in our communities are the responsibility of all of us and the society will be served better when we feel obligated to act accordingly.



Like many of the world's great ideas, the *Healthy Communities - Healthy Youth* concept is really a matter of getting back to basics, more importantly, of understanding why people today do not feel empowered to take personal action in a society organized around services, not community; of a citizenry living in communities which no longer have expectations that anyone other than the parents and those paid to do it should take any responsibility for the well-being of children and adolescents. John McKnight writes, "Many of us have come to recognize that as we exiled our fallible neighbours to the control of managers, therapists, and technicians, we lost much of our power to be the vital centre of society. We forgot about the capacity of every single one of us to do good work and instead, made some of us the objects of good works — services of those who serve. As institutions have grown in power, we have become too impotent to be called real citizens and too disconnected to be effective members of community."

As a result, we've been relegated to a position of being powerless onlookers, adopting a problem-solving approach in addressing youth issues in our families, in our neighbourhoods, and in the communities in which we live.

What the Search Institute's *Healthy Communities - Healthy Youth* initiative proposes is that we redirect our attention to 40 developmental assets identified as the foundation upon which healthy development of all young people will take place. Built around eight key asset topics - support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity — the Institute goes on to define what parents, young people, neighbours, schools, youth programs, and interested adults can do in a practical way to assure that every youngster within their influence has maximum opportunity to acquire as many assets as possible.

What's different about the asset-building approach? First of all, it builds on community capacity, not weakness. In the words of Kretzmann and McKnight, "Building a team of community



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leaders who are clearly oriented toward finding and mobilizing the already existing gifts and capacities of residents and their associations is crucial to the success of the community-building enterprise.....fortunately, every community is blessed with residents who are fundamentally committed to what might be called a capacity-oriented view of the world. These are the folks who understand well the fact that the proverbial glass is both half empty and half full, but who insist always on focusing first on the fullness, on the gifts and capacities of their families, friends and neighbours.”

As a result, asset builders talk about focussing on the positive, not the problems of proactive rather than reactive solutions, and of mobilizing the public as well as all youth-serving organizations in a community rather than relying heavily on professionals. Asset builders are committed to unleashing the caring potential of all residents and organizations so that public resources can be focused on areas of greatest need rather than promoting further reliance on public funding to provide services. Asset builders are driven by a hope that change is possible rather than a sense of

despair about entrenched problems.

In his recent book *All Kids Are Our Kids*, Search Institute Peter L. Benson made it clear how simple yet profound this asset-building notion is. “Much of the work of asset building occurs for free. It is the stuff people do in their everyday lives.”

And we're talking powerful, life-changing stuff here. Through its research, the Search Institute has identified forty factors in young people's lives that make them more likely to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. There's much evidence the presence or absence of these developmental assets in the lives of young people has a significant impact on their healthy development. If Canadian research mirrors the experience south of 49th parallel and focus groups of Canadian parents and teens suggest it will, we'll find there are many young Canadians not acquiring these “building blocks” to the future so important to their healthy development.

The Search Institute's finding offers evidence of the power of assets to protect youth from harmful or unhealthy choices. They're represented in four ranges — those young people with 0-10 assets, 11-20 assets, 21-30 assets, and 31-40 assets. In studies

of nearly half a million teens across a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic groups, the results were alarming if one accepts the premise that all youth should have at least 31 of the 40 assets in their lives. Only 8% of those surveyed experience this level, with 30% having 21-30 assets, 42% with 11-20, and 20% with 0-10 assets in their lives. There is strong evidence in the research that the average number of developmental assets present in the lives of young people diminishes from a high of 21.5 in Grade 6 to 17.2 in Grade 12.

All this becomes even more worrisome when these findings are compared with the importance the assets play in protecting kids from high-risk behaviour and in promoting positive attitudes in behaviours.

Three percent of teens with 31-40 assets reported problems with alcohol, while 53% of those with 0-10 assets reported they'd used alcohol three or more times in the past 30 days or got drunk one or more times in the past two weeks.

Violence was found to be a concern of 6% of teens with 31-40 assets; 61% of young people with 0-10 assets reported they had engaged in three or more acts of hitting, fighting, or injuring another person during the past 12 months.

At the same time, there is convincing evidence that assets protect young people from negative behaviours and increase the chances they'll grow up demonstrating positive attitudes. For example: while 7% of teens with 0-10 assets reported success in school, 53% of those with 21-40 assets reported they got mostly A's on their report cards. Twenty-five percent of kids with 0-10 assets were concerned with their physical health compared with 88% of those with 31-40 assets, who attributed high priority to maintaining good health.

So what does or can this mean for those potential asset builders among us? Let me defer to a comment I heard recently which I can recall but not attribute to any one person. It went something like this: "There is a sleeping giant in this country and it will be found in the passion Canadian parents and communities have for their children."

It is time for us to become passionate about our young people, to make it our goal that every young person experiences many points of formal and informal relational support on a daily basis. Even those seemingly small gestures — calling

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children by name, acknowledging their presence, exchanging greetings, smiling when passing a young person on the street or in the mall — are important elements of support that when accumulated over time create a critical mass of positive nurture. And it is time that those of us concerned about the well-being of young people become unreasonable.

That's because it is unreasonable that 1,472,000 children in Canada were reported living in poverty in 1995, an increase of 58% since 1989. In British Columbia those numbers increased 85%. It is unreasonable that 30% of Canadian young people failed to complete high school. It is unreasonable that the average Canadian teen reportedly spends less than 17 minutes per week in meaningful conversation with their parents yet by the time they graduate from Grade 12 they will have spent nearly 15,000 hours in front of a television set.

And so two important questions for all of us to contemplate as we enter a new year: Who was there for you when you were growing up? Who's there for the kids in your life and within your influence today? Boys and Girls Clubs of British Columbia is committed to introducing the Search Institute's asset-building model and material to anyone who's interested and would like to make a difference in the lives of kids throughout B.C. Please call (604) 321-5621, fax (604) 321-5941, or e-mail bgbc@bc.sympatico.ca for further information. For those on the net, you can access the Search Institute at www.search-institute.org ✿

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40 Developmental Assets

Search Institute has identified the following building blocks of healthy development that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.

CATEGORY	ASSET NAME AND DEFINITION
EXTERNAL ASSETS	Support <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family support—Family life provides high levels of love and support. 2. Positive family communication—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parent(s). 3. Other adult relationships—Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults. 4. Caring neighborhood—Young person experiences caring neighbors. 5. Caring school climate—School provides a caring, encouraging environment. 6. Parent involvement in schooling—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
	Empowerment <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Community values youth—Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth. 8. Youth as resources—Young people are given useful roles in the community. 9. Service to others—Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week. 10. Safety—Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.
	Boundaries & Expectations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Family boundaries—Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts. 12. School boundaries—School provides clear rules and consequences. 13. Neighborhood boundaries—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior. 14. Adult role models—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior. 15. Positive peer influence—Young person's best friends model responsible behavior. 16. High expectations—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.
	Constructive Use of Time <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. Creative activities—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts. 18. Youth programs—Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community. 19. Religious community—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution. 20. Time at home—Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.
	Commitment to Learning <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 21. Achievement motivation—Young person is motivated to do well in school. 22. School engagement—Young person is actively engaged in learning. 23. Homework—Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day. 24. Bonding to school—Young person cares about her or his school. 25. Reading for pleasure—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
	Positive Values <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 26. Caring—Young person places high value on helping other people. 27. Equality and social justice—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty. 28. Integrity—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs. 29. Honesty—Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy." 30. Responsibility—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility. 31. Restraint—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
INTERNAL ASSETS	Social Competencies <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 32. Planning and decision making—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices. 33. Interpersonal competence—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills. 34. Cultural competence—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds. 35. Resistance skills—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations. 36. Peaceful conflict resolution—Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.
	Positive Identity <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 37. Personal power—Young person feels he or she has control over "things that happen to me." 38. Self-esteem—Young person reports having a high self-esteem. 39. Sense of purpose—Young person reports that "my life has a purpose." 40. Positive view of personal future—Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.