

## Building Blocks for Raising Healthy and Successful Youth: A Profile of Development Assets of Youth Living in Tirana City, Albania

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**Abstract** This paper begins by shortly presenting two approaches to helping young people grow up healthy and successfully: 1) problems' prevention / reduction approach and 2) strength-based approach; by emphasizing the need to find a balance between the two. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the strength-based approach by presenting Search Institute's Development Asset Framework. This framework identifies 40 elements of young people's positive growth and development. This section is followed by an overview of the state of development assets among young people attending public secondary and high schools of Tirana city, in Albania, by providing an analysis according to eight assets categories (support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity) as well as according to five context areas (personal, family, school, social and community). The paper concludes by stressing the power of development assets and the role that everyone may play in building these assets.

**Key words:** development assets framework, strength-based approach, positive development.

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### 1. What do Children Need to Grow up Healthy and Successfully?

Until 1980s, young people have been implicitly or explicitly considered "*as problems to be managed*" (Benson 2006; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray & Foster 1998) or at the best scenario "*as problems expected to happen*" (Lerner, 2003). This approach is focused on problems' identification (e.g. substance use, school drop-outs, violence, juvenile delinquency etc.) and problems' reduction through different prevention programs, early interventions and provision of social services. (Lerner et al. 2005; Benson, 2003; Granger, 2002). Of course it is very important to engage in preventing or reducing problems but this approach isn't sufficient on its own. According to Pittman et al. (1996) and Lerner et al., (2000) *problem free is not fully prepared...* At the beginning of 1990's researchers, professionals of the field and policymakers started to make this important statement the motto of their work. They acknowledged the need to support youth develop across different areas, by taking into consideration cognitive, social, moral, vocational, cultural and physical wellbeing. In this regard, they started to broaden the range strategies that addressed young people by highlighting the importance of promoting positive elements of human development (Pittman et al. 2003). According to this approach youth are perceived "*as resources to be developed*". (Roth et al., 1998; Benson, 2006).

However, what communities most need today is a balance between the two approaches: 1. problems' prevention/reduction and 2. promotion of young people positive aspects (strength based approach). These two approaches need to be seen as complementary of each other (Benson, 2003).

#### 1.1 Development Assets Framework

Researchers from Search Institute<sup>1</sup> in their effort to identify variables of a strength based approach to healthy development, designed the framework of development assets (Benson 2006). Assets are "building blocks"

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<sup>1</sup> Search Institute is a US-based independent, nonprofit, nonsectarian organization whose mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth and communities.

that young people need in order to grow up healthy and successfully. Search Institute has identified 40 "building blocks" that help youth to fulfill their potential (Scales, 2000).

*External Assets:* 20 external assets focus on positive experiences that young people receive from family, school, peers, community and other institutions. They can be grouped in four main categories (Benson, 2003; 2006):

- **Support:** Young people need to experience support, care, and love from their families and many others. They need organizations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments.
- **Empowerment:** Young people need to be valued by their community and have opportunities to contribute to others. For this to occur, they must be safe and feel secure.
- **Boundaries and expectations:** Young people need to know what is expected of them and whether activities and behaviors are "in bounds" or "out bounds".
- **Constructive use of time:** Young people need constructive, enriching opportunities for growth through creative activities, youth programs, congregational involvement and quality time at home.

*Internal Assets:* 20 internal assets reflect internal values, skills and beliefs that young people also need to fully engage with and function in the world around them. More specifically they are grouped as following: (Benson, 2003; 2006):

- **Commitment to learning:** Young people need to develop a lifelong commitment to education and learning.
- **Positive values:** Youth need to develop strong values that guide their choices.
- **Social competencies:** Young people need skills and competencies that equip them to make positive choices, build relationships, and succeed in life.
- **Positive identity:** Young people need a strong sense of their own power, purpose, worth and promise.

But how is the state of development assets among young people living in Tirana city, Albania<sup>2</sup>? The following section will present the main findings in this regard.

## 2. Methodology

The data presented in this paper are based on a representative random sample of 1878, 6th to 12th-grade students in public secondary and high schools of Tirana city. The sample is large and diverse, it has been drawn from all public secondary and high schools from all mini-municipalities of Tirana city<sup>3</sup>. The table below summarizes the demographic composition of the sample:

**Table 1. Demographic composition of the sample.**

	Number of youth surveyed	Percent of Total
<b>Total sample</b>	1878	100
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	881	46.9
Female	997	53.1
<b>Grade</b>		
6	338	18.0

<sup>2</sup> Tirana is the capital city of Albania (situated in South East Europe). As of 2008, the urban population was officially estimated at 618,431. Tirana is home to a significant young population. As such it is host to many public and private academic institutions.

<sup>3</sup> The Municipality of Tirana city is divided into 11 smaller administrative units referred to as *Njësi Bashkiake* (mini-municipal Units).

7	321	17.1
8	320	17.0
9	329	17.5
10	209	11.1
11	183	9.7
12	178	9.5

The instrument used to collect data was DAP (Development Assets Profile), an instrument developed by Search Institute, based on the Development Asset framework and validated for the Albanian context<sup>4</sup>. This 58-item survey uses a simple four-point response scale for all its items (*Not at all or Rarely / Sometimes / Often/ Always*). DAP was administered individually like any other self-report questionnaire. It took on average one hour to administer DAP with young people – this time includes not only completion of DAP survey by youth but also instruction giving and a warm up exercise at the beginning of the process. After screening for validity, completeness and recoding any problematic responses, the DAP surveys has been entered and scored using Excel, as well as SPSS for more advanced analysis. The survey items can be grouped and interpreted according to eight assets' categories (*1.support, 2. empowerment, 3. boundaries and expectations, 4. constructive use of time, 5. commitment to learning, 6. positive values, 7. social competencies and 8. positive identity*), as well as according to five context areas (*1. personal, 2. family, 3. school, 4. social and 5. community*), by providing in this way useful information on the state of development assets among youth in Tirana city.

### 3. Findings and Interpretation

Data analysis revealed that the total assets score of surveyed youth is 41 (out of 60, the maximum score)<sup>5</sup> (see Fig.1), meaning that overall youth living in Tirana city are at the lowest limit of the *Good* range with regards to development assets. This score represents relatively moderate level of reported assets overall, but levels vary across asset categories and context areas. Generally speaking, youth with total assets score in this range may have a higher risk of negative outcomes such as tobacco, alcohol and drug use, peer conflicts, antisocial behavior and violence, sexual activity and teen pregnancy; as well as lower chances of positive outcomes such as school success, thriving and leadership, compared to youth with higher total assets score. Nevertheless, the total assets score in this range is promising, indicating that there is a combination of weaknesses and strengths upon which to build (Search Institute, 2005).

Figure 1. Mean scores for eight assets categories and five context areas

Support	Empowerment	Boundaries & Expectations	Constructive use of time	External Assets mean score	Total Assets score 41.42
21.62	20.4	21.67	15.48	19.93	
Commitment to learning	Positive values	Social Skills	Positive Identity	Internal Assets mean score	

<sup>4</sup> Search Institute in collaboration with World Vision in Albania contextualized DAP for Albanian context in 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Total assets score is the sum of scores on the external and internal asset scales, thus ranging from 0-60. Interpretative ranges for the total asset score: Excellent: 51-60; Good: 41-50; Fair: 30-40; Low: 0-29 (Search Institute, 2005).

22.56	20.38	21.75	20.84	21.49	
Personal	Social	Family	School	Community	Context Areas
22.03	20.52	24.39	23.13	15.19	

### 3.1 Assets Categories

In terms of the two broad categories *external assets* vs. *internal assets* data analysis indicated that youth in Tirana city are doing a little better in terms of internal assets than external assets, however the difference between the two could not be considered meaningful – with the Internal Assets ranging at the lowest level of *Good* range (21-25) and External Assets ranging at the highest level of the *Fair* range (15-20) (see mean scores at Fig.1), representing in this way a mixture of strengths and weaknesses in these two broad assets categories .

Overall, the external assets mean score<sup>6</sup> of (19.93) (see Fig.1) represents a relatively borderline level of assets experienced by youth in Tirana city – this means that some assets are experienced but some are weak and/or infrequent. This leads to considerable room for strengthening assets in some areas. More specifically:

- Good score on the Support scale (21.67) (see Fig.1) suggests a mixture of strengths and weaknesses across specific assets included in this category. Strength areas are related to parent-child communication, family support, supportive school environment; while encouragement and support in community is an area that needs special consideration.
- Fair score on Empowerment scale (20.4) (see Fig.1) indicates for strengths in the area of safety across family, school and community, but on the other side it reflects a pattern of weaknesses with regards to youth feeling valued and respected by others and being perceived as resources in the community.
- Good score on Boundaries & Expectations scale (21.67) (see Fig.1) is a consequence of a general pattern of assets within this category related mainly with positive role models among friends, family and outside the family, plus the presence of clear rules and consequences at home and school, with the exception of neighborhood boundaries (clear rules and consequences at community).
- Fair score on Constructive use of time (15.48) (see Fig.1) reflects little involvement in three extracurricular areas: religious or spiritual activity; creative activities; and sport, club or other group; with the exception of moderate degree of reported family life involvement.

The internal assets the mean score<sup>7</sup> of (21.49) (see Fig.1) shows that youth in Tirana city are experiencing moderate level of assets – most assets are experienced often, but still there is room for improvement. More specifically:

- Good score on Commitment to learning scale (22.56) (see Fig.1) represents uniformly moderate commitment to learning across the following items: bonding to school, school engagement, achievement motivation, and homework; and relative weakness in terms of the reading for pleasure item.
- Positive values scale scoring at the highest level of Fair range (20.38) (see Fig.1) is due to a combination of strengths and weaknesses in sub-areas. Relatively strong areas are: restrain,

<sup>6</sup> Interpretative ranges for DAP External Asset scale and Assets Categories under this scale: excellent: 26-30; good: 21-25; fair:15-20; low: 0-14 (Search Institute, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Interpretative ranges for DAP Internal Assets scale and Assets Categories under this scale: excellent: 26-30; good: 21-25; fair:15-20; low: 0-14 (Search Institute, 2005).

- caring, and responsibility. Weakness areas: equality and social justice, integrity, honesty.
- Good score on Social skills scale (21.75) (see Fig.1) indicates moderate ratings in items related to social competencies such as: ability to resist negative peer pressure, build friendship, accept diversity; as well as lower ratings in terms of planning and decision making and ability to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner.
  - Positive Identity scale scoring at the highest level of Fair range (20.84) (see Fig.1) is linked with relative strengths on items such as optimism and sense of purpose in life; and relative weakness on items related to self-esteem and internal locus of control.

### 3.2 Context Areas

- Good score on Personal context scale (22.03)<sup>8</sup> (see Fig.1) reflects individual characteristics, particularly assets from Positive Values and Positive Identity as well as certain assets from Social Competencies category.
- Social context scale includes assets related to relationships with others, both adults and peer. More specifically it includes assets from Social Competencies asset category, but also characteristics such as support, role models, and helping others from other categories (Search Institute, 2005). The score on Social context scale (20.52) (see Fig.1) ranging at the lowest level of the good scale suggests that some assets related to social relationships are experienced by youth, however more need to be done in terms of support, encouragement and positive role models necessary for health development.
- Family context scale reflects assets related to home and family (Search Institute, 2005). The score on this scale (24.39) (see Fig.1) ranging at the highest level of the good scale suggests that youth have good levels of safety, warmth and support at home; they have relatively good child-parent communications. It also suggest that parents are relatively active in providing advice, setting and enforcing rules and monitoring child behavior.
- School context scale combines assets related to the school environment, relationships with teachers, and youth's attitude towards school (Search Institute, 2005). Good score on this context scale (23.13) (see Fig.1) indicate that youth have a relatively safe and caring school environment with clear rules that are generally fairly enforced, combined with a considerable personal commitment to learning.
- Community context scale combines assets related to neighborhood and community support, empowerment and positive use of time in the larger community (Search Institute, 2005). The score of Community context scale (15.19) (see Fig.1) ranging at the lowest level of the fair scale reflects weak community assets for youth, relative poor community attitudes towards youth, relatively few after-school activities and youth service opportunities.

## 4. Putting the Pieces Together

### 4.1 Assets Categories

Figure 2 shows eight categories of assets in descending order based on the mean scores. While figure 3 shows eight categories of assets based on the percentage of youth experiencing them "always".

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<sup>8</sup> Interpretative ranges for DAP Context Areas: excellent: 26-30; good: 21-25; fair:15-20; low: 0-14 (Search Institute, 2005).

Figure 2. Mean score for eight assets' categories

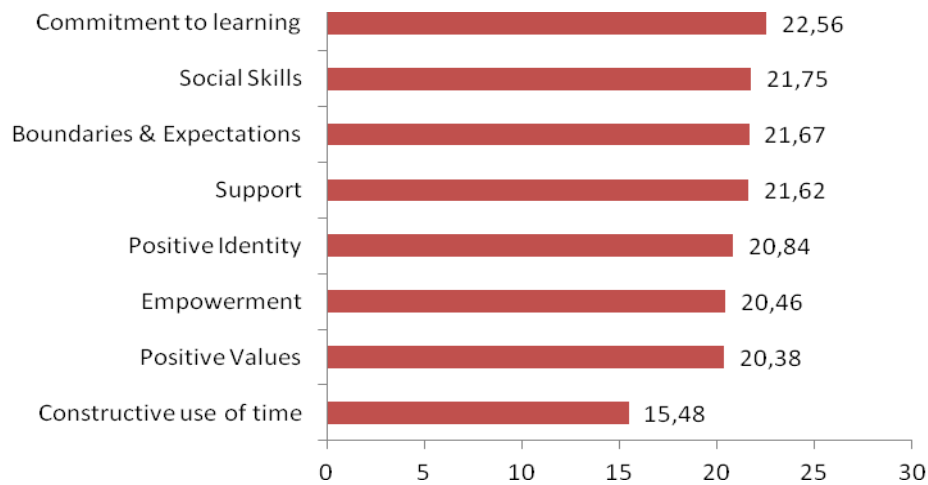
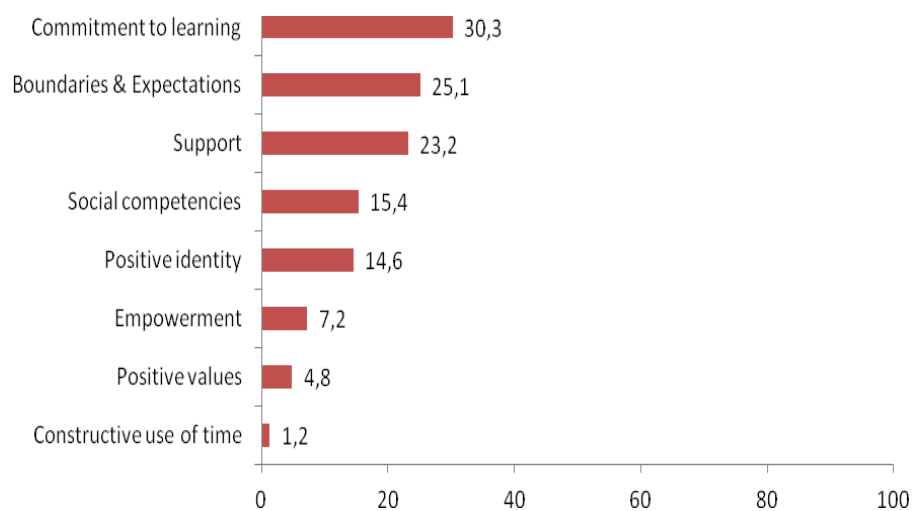


Figure 3. Percentage of youth who reported to have experienced "always" the assets' categories



- Commitment to learning is the assets' category with the highest mean score, being at the middle of Good range (21-25). Most assets under this category are experienced often but still there is room for improvement. This assets category is reported to be experienced "always" only by one third of youth in Tirana city.
- Constructive use of time is the category with the lowest mean score (15.48), being at the lowest level of the Fair range. This indicates that most assets under this category are experienced infrequently and there is a great need to strength assets of this category. A very low percentage of young people (1%) has reported to have experienced this asset category.
- The rest of assets' categories: Boundaries & Expectations (experienced by 25% of youth); Support (experienced by 23% of youth), Social skills (experienced by 15% of youth), Positive Identity (experienced by 14% of youth), Empowerment (experienced by 7% of youth); and Positive values (experienced by only 5% of youth) are at the borderline of Fair and Good ranges – meaning that some assets are experienced often and some others are weak and infrequent . The results for these category suggest the need for intervention to strengthen the assets.

#### 4.2 Context categories

Figure 4 shows five contexts areas in descending order based on the mean scores. While figure 5 shows context areas based on the percentage of youth experiencing them "always"

Figure 4 . Mean scores for five context's areas

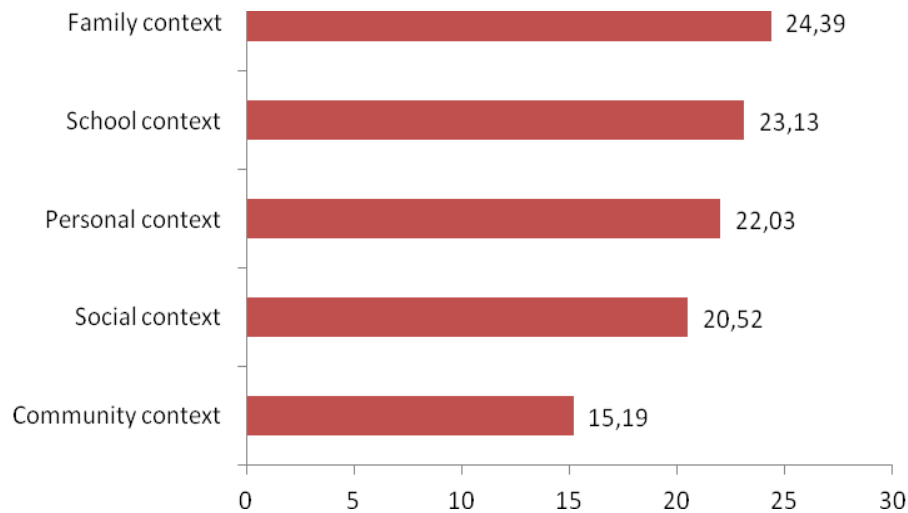
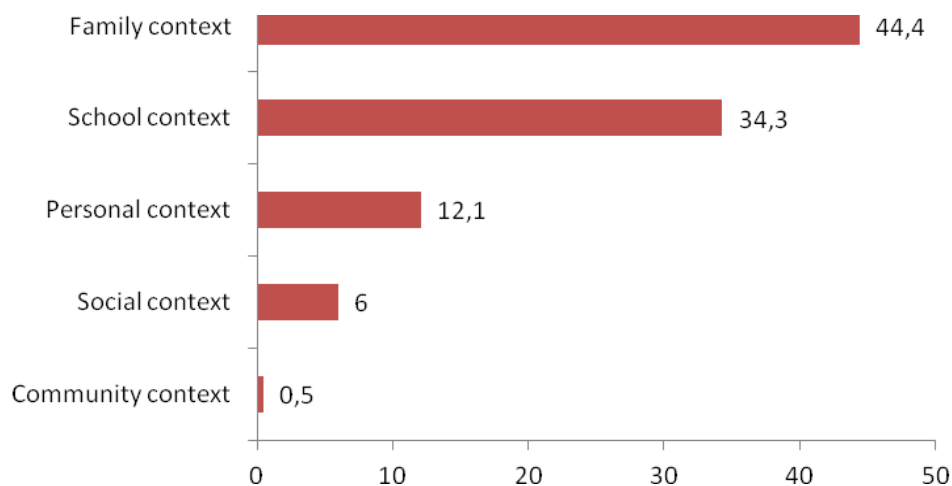


Figure 5. Percentage of young people who have reported to experience five contexts' areas "always"



- Family context area has the highest mean score among other context areas. Scoring at the highest level of Good range (24.39) it suggests that assets of this areas are frequent. Furthermore about 44% of young people have reported to have experienced this, indicating that this is an area of strength to build upon.
- Family context area is followed by school context area scoring at the middle of the Good range (23.13) and being experienced by about one third of youth (34.3%).
- Personal context and Social context areas are experienced by less youth respectively 12% and 6%, highlighting the necessity to intervene in order to improve the situation.

- Community context area has the lowest mean score (15.19) being at the lowest level of the Fair range, indicating that most assets related to this area are experienced infrequently . Only 0.5% of youth have reported to experience this area "always". Based on this results there is a tremendous need to engage in building assets related to this context area.

## 5. Assets in Specific Subgroups of Young People

Up to this point the focus has been on overall patterns of assets among all youth. When we look at specific subgroups of youth we start to see some differences in their experience of assets.

For example, data analysis revealed that youth report a decline in assets experiences with age. From grade sixth, youth report fewer assets. Theoretically, it would have been desirable for assets to increase between 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. On one aspect, a decline in assets may seem inevitable, as young people mature and become more independent. But while some assets may become less essential across time (e.g., family boundaries change as independence grows –see Fig.6), there is no reason for most of assets to become less important (Benson, et. al, 1999)

This research has also shown that assets are experienced by more females than males, although this gender difference is not large.

**Figure 6. Percentage of youth experiencing assets' categories according to gender, grade, type of school**

	Support	Empowerment	Boundaries & Expectations	Constructive use of time	Commitment to learning	Positive Values	Social Skills	Positive Identity	External Assets	Internal Assets	Total of Assets
<b>Total sample</b>	23.2	7.2	25.1	1.2	30.3	4.8	15.4	14.6	2.9	7.2	3.7
<b>Gender</b>											
Male	22.2	6.6	23.4	1	24	4.4	10.9	17.9	2.3	6.1	2.4
Female	24	7.7	26.7	1.3	35.9	5.2	19.5	11.6	3.4	8.2	4.9
<b>Grade</b>											
grade 6	37.6	8.6	42.6	2.4	50.6	9.8	21.9	12.1	5.3	13.6	8.3
grade 7	32.7	9.7	37.7	1.2	38.6	8.1	18.4	15.6	5	12.1	5.9
grade 8	20.3	3.8	20.3	2.2	28.1	3.4	15	15	1.6	5.6	2.5
grade 9	21.3	9.4	23.7	0.9	23.7	4.3	14.9	21	4	5.5	3.3
grade 10	11.5	4.3	10	0	16.3	0	12.9	10	0	2.4	0.5
grade 11	14.8	8.2	14.8	0	29.5	2.2	9.8	15.8	0.5	4.4	1.1
grade 12	9.6	4.5	9	0	10.1	1.7	8.4	0	0.6	1.1	0.6
<b>High / secondary school</b>											
High school	11.9	5.6	11.2	0	18.6	1.2	10.5	11.6	0.4	2.6	0.7
Secondary school	28.1	7.9	31.2	1.7	35.4	6.4	17.6	15.9	4	9.3	5



## 6. Instead of Conclusions

The development assets framework offers a positive and optimistic response to the challenges and risks young people face nowadays. Research has shown that the more assets young people have: The more likely they are to have high commitment to learning and high academic performance. Likewise, they are likely to be very involved in a range of extracurricular activities, demonstrate leadership skills, resist danger and control impulsive behavior, value diversity, maintain good personal health and overcome adversity. Furthermore, this is significantly related to increasing protection against negative behaviors such as: substance use, peer conflicts, antisocial behavior, violence, delinquency, school truancy, premature sexual activity and teen pregnancy etc (Fisher, 2008 & Benson, et. al., 1999). In this regard the assets provide a framework for action that encourages all individuals to make a difference. Search Institute has identified six principles that guide the assets building efforts (Search Institute, 2006):

- 1) All young people need assets: Although it is important to focus on youth at risk, or disadvantaged ones, all young people will benefit from having more assets than they have.
- 2) Everyone can build assets: All adults, youth, teachers, parents, community members etc. can play a role in developing assets.
- 3) Relationships are key: Strong relationships between adults and young people, between young people and their peers, teenagers and children are central to assets building.
- 4) Asset building is an ongoing process: Building assets starts when a child is born and continues through high school and beyond.
- 5) Consistent messages are important: It is important that all actors give young people consistent and positive messages about what is important and what is expected from them.
- 6) Intentional repetition is important: Assets must be continually reinforced across the years and in all areas of a young persons' life.

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