Asset-Based Development for Child and Youth Care

Hilary A. Rose

An asset-based approach is being championed by the field of child and youth care work, focusing on strengths as opposed to weaknesses, assets as opposed to deficits. This article highlights the Search Institute’s theoretically-based and empirically-supported model of developmental assets (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Scales & Leffert, 2004) as a basis for interventions in the context of child and youth care.

Historically, the deficit model has been used to study and intervene in problem populations (Scales & Leffert, 2004; Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). Informed by the medical model, the deficit model has traditionally focused on what is wrong rather than what is right (i.e., asset models). This negative focus affects how the media, and ultimately the public, view young people (Damon & Gregory, 2003; Scales & Leffert, 2004). In a recent newspaper article covering a report published by the World Health Organization, Canada was described as being a “nation of physically fit teens in generally good physical and mental health.” Nevertheless, the article’s headline read that Canadian “Teens are fat, lazy pot-smokers” (Teens, 2004).

Positive Development

An alternative approach looks at the proverbial glass as half full instead of half empty. In other words, some helping professionals use an asset-based approach instead of a deficit-based approach with children and youth, (e.g., Scales & Leffert, 2004; Villarruel et al., 2003). Anglin (1999) has argued that, of all the helping professions, child and youth care orient most toward a “social competence perspective” (p. 145). Rather than focus on what children and youth cannot do or accomplish, the emphasis is on what they can do. In other words, an asset-based approach is about the target group’s strengths and competencies.

For almost a quarter of a century, the zeitgeist regarding social development has been about positive development (e.g., Scales & Leffert, 2004; Villarruel et al., 2003). Positive development emphasizes strengths over weaknesses, resilience over risk, and assets over deficits. Authors who promote positive development include Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000) and Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, and Keith (2003). In child and youth care, Krueger and colleagues (Krueger, 1998; Krueger, Galovits, Wilder, & Pick, 1999) and Phelan (1999) have stressed positive development by emphasizing facilitation of strengths.

An example of an asset-based research program is the work of Peter Benson and his colleagues at the Search Institute, an independent, nonprofit organization that supports healthy development of children and youth through research. The Search Institute has developed a survey to measure developmental assets of adolescents. This survey, Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (PSL-AB), includes a 156-item questionnaire that measures 40 developmental assets (Benson et al., 1998; Scales et al., 2000). The 40 assets are categorized in terms of external and internal
assets which contain subcategories of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time (external assets), and commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (internal assets).

Data have been collected from over one million American adolescents in over two thousand American communities. Findings have shown that the average number of assets reported by youth in grades 6-12 is 18 assets out of a possible 40 (Benson et al., 1998). Boys tended to report having fewer assets than did girls. Perhaps more surprising is the finding that the average number of assets reported decreased from 21 reported in grade 6 to 17 in grade 12. A later study showed the relationship between developmental assets and thriving, defined as adolescent well-being, including the presence of healthy behaviors and the absence of problem behaviors (Scales et al., 2000). In general, the more developmental assets youth reported having, the more they were likely to report thriving outcomes, such as school success, good physical health, and overcoming adversity.

Although research on the developmental assets of children and youth in care has yet to be conducted, it seems likely that those in care will exhibit fewer than the average 18 out of 40 assets reported by youth in the studies reported to date (Benson et al., 1998; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Nevertheless, given that the field of child and youth care utilizes a strength-based approach that focuses on positive development (e.g., Krueger, 1998; Phelan, 1999), the Search Institute provides a theoretically-driven, empirically-tested model that may guide child and youth care workers in formulating interventions that target these important developmental assets.

**External Assets**

These 20 assets exist outside of the individual child or youth. They can be found in the microsystems which children and youth inhabit such as family, school, neighborhood, community organizations, and religious institutions. Children and youth who report having these assets feel cared for and cared about. The external assets can be categorized in terms of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time (Scales & Leffert, 2004).

**Support.** Support comes from caring adults in the family, the school setting, and the community (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Communication is perceived as positive, and school and neighborhood climates are perceived as caring. Caring adults are seen as being involved in the lives of children and youth across various settings. "Supported youth know they are not alone; they know they can rely on positive, fulfilling relationships with numerous adults in their families, schools, and communities" (Scales & Leffert, 2004, p. 23).

For children and youth in care, the importance of this asset is a given: "Caring relationships and human connections are essential to healthy growth and development" (Krueger, 1998, p. 67). Although family support may be compromised, support of nonparental adults is the basis of child and youth care. Ideally, child and youth care workers are trained or supervised in developmental issues, communication skills, and disciplinary alternatives to punishment (Krueger et al., 1999). Child and youth care workers also become sensitive to the interconnectedness of systems such as the residential home, the family, and the school (Garfat & McElwee, 2001; Stuart, 2001).

**Empowerment.** Children and youth feel safe and valued (Scales & Leffert, 2004). At a minimum, a feeling of being safe in the home, the school, and the community, coupled with a sense of being valued, leads to a sense of agency and ultimately to a desire to serve others. Youth are given useful roles in society; at the same time, they seek out useful roles in society. "In adolescence there is a heightened importance for believing that one can make a contribution, play a meaningful role, and have a place in society where one fits" (p. 50).

Children and youth in care are often removed from homes where they feel neither safe nor valued and may not have a sense of empowerment. Developing a sense of empowerment is, therefore, one of the goals of child and youth care (Krueger et al., 1999). Child and youth care workers strive to recognize that youth "feel empowered when they believe they have the ability to relate, discover, and make meaningful contributions. Empowerment...evolves from being engaged in activities and learning with others who believe that youth have within themselves the capacity to change and grow" (p. 18).
Boundaries and expectations. Clear boundaries and expectations exist, are communicated, and are consistent over time and across different microsystems such as family, school, and neighborhood (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Positive role models, both adults and peers, are available to children and youth. "Young people need a clear sense of the rules or limits in the various settings in which they live and interact.... Youth also need adults who model healthy and constructive behaviors, particularly as adolescents begin to 'try on' adult roles themselves" (p. 75).

Children and youth in care may not have a history of appropriate boundaries and expectations. Child and youth care workers, therefore, aspire to an authoritative rather than authoritarian approach by setting clear limits and developmentally-appropriate expectations for behavior (Krueger, 1998; Krueger et al., 1999). In addition, the child and youth care literature advocates disciplinary alternatives to punishment, viewing crises as opportunities for growth and development. Ideally, child and youth care workers model the behaviors and skills that children and youth in care are expected to develop.

Constructive use of time. Opportunities exist for creative, pro-social, or faith-based activities at home, in school, and in the community (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Children and youth spend several hours a week in extracurricular arts or sports, with minimal time spent "hanging out" or doing "nothing special." Research shows that constructive use of free time prevents involvement in risky behaviors, encourages the development of other positive attributes, and allows for the development of prosocial skills (p. 97).

Almost 50% of the time of children and youth is "free" or unobligated, and thus the context of leisure is an important one (Caldwell & Baldwin, 2003). Although there is a body of research that focuses on the negative aspects, or "dark side," of leisure (e.g., substance abuse, delinquency, sexual experimentation), research also has shown that participation in leisure is key to learning interpersonal skills, developing cognitive and physical abilities, and exploring identity issues. Identity development in particular is associated with leisure, as leisure by definition is freely chosen and intrinsically motivated. Child and youth care workers try to offer a range of creative, expressive, and athletic activities for the children and youth in their care (Krueger et al., 1999).

Internal Assets

The 20 internal assets are found within the individual child or youth. In general, they indicate a positive, healthy, pro-social orientation on the part of children and youth. These developing individuals feel good about who they are and what they can do. The internal assets can be categorized in terms of commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Scales & Leffert, 2004).

Commitment to learning. Children and youth feel connected to school and motivated to learn (Scales & Leffert, 2004). These individuals are actively engaged in the learning process, including regular completion of homework and reading for pleasure for several hours a week. "The desire to learn new things, pleasure in doing so, and knowing how to go about learning new ideas or skills together constitute 'a commitment to learning' that is deeper and more lifelong than simply pursuing success in school" (p. 120).

Children and youth cannot feel motivated to learn if they do not feel safe and valued (Phelan, 1999). Thus, security and acceptance needs of children and youth must be met before they can attend to academic demands. A basic tenet of child and youth care work is to ensure that children and youth in care feel safe and supported. In addition, workers encourage the development of life skills as well as creative and athletic abilities (Krueger et al., 1999). Finally, child and youth care workers are aware of, and try to foster, the interconnections among the various settings that children and youth inhabit, including the residential setting and the school setting (Stuart, 2001).

Positive values. Children and youth report having prosocial values reflecting honesty, integrity, and responsibility (Scales & Leffert, 2004). At the same time, they have a sense of social justice in terms of equality and a sense of restraint with respect to underage drinking, use of illicit drugs, and engagement in sexual activity. Ultimately, "positive values become deep commitments that guide how young people think and act" (p. 149).

"The most meaningful youth work practice has to do with how the worker lives everyday, ordinary life around and with and on behalf of young people" (Magnuson, Baizerman, & Stringer, 2001, p. 310).
These authors view child and youth work as a practice of "life values," which emerge through everyday activities and reveal what is understood and valued about life (Brockelman, 1985). Not only does the youth care worker come to know the youth's life values, but the youth also comes to know the youth care worker's life values as well (Magnuson et al., 2001).

Social competencies. Children and youth exhibit age-appropriate social skills such as the ability to make friends and resolve conflict (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Additional skills include planning and decision-making, awareness and acceptance of others who are different from themselves, and the ability to resist peer pressure. "Social competence involves the personal skills that children and adolescents use to deal with the many choices, challenges, and opportunities they face" (p. 173).

Children and youth care workers strive to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses; the emphasis is on social competencies, not social inadequacies (CYCAA, 1996; Stuart, 2001). Especially with regard to youth, care workers emphasize learning job skills, and ultimately, independent living skills (Krueger, 1998). Activities of daily living, routine chores, and problem-solving exercises are important for being interdependent and becoming independent and are enhanced when shared with child and youth care workers who can teach, coach, and model life skills (Krueger et al., 1999).

Positive identity. Children and youth have a high sense of self-esteem (Scales & Leffert, 2004). These individuals report feeling that their lives have purpose, they have control over things that happen to them, and they are optimistic about their futures. Identity development, one of the central tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1963), can be defined as "an integrated view of oneself encompassing self-concept, beliefs, capacities, roles, and personal history" (Scales & Leffert, 2004, p. 193).

Children and youth in care typically have a mistrust of others and a sense of futility and hopelessness about the future (Phelan, 1999). Often they lack a sense of control over their lives as they feel trapped in a chaotic or tragic past. The goal of child and youth care workers, therefore, is to help these young people live meaningful lives in the present and look forward to the future with hope (Durrant, 1993; Kagan, 1996). "There is a need to develop a safe place to enable people to let go of the usual labels and social rules with which they surround and protect themselves.... As a person allows the new facts...to be absorbed, he experiences a cognitive dissonance that challenges the old story" (Phelan, 1999, p. 27).

Conclusion

Although the developmental assets approach shares underlying assumptions with the field of child and youth care, we cannot ignore the limitations of this approach with respect to children and youth in care. Studies reported to date (Benson et al., 1998; Scales et al., 2000; Scales & Leffert, 2004) do not represent children and youth in care, and no doubt greatly overestimate the developmental assets of those in care. We suggest, however, that the asset-based approach is both relevant and useful in formulating
interventions that target positive development for all children and youth—including those in care.

Hilary A. Rose, PhD, is an associate professor in the department of applied human sciences at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. She can be contacted by: phone: 1-514-848-2424 ext. 5814; fax: 1-514-848-2262; or e-mail: hrose@alcor.concordia.ca

REFERENCES


Art by Caleb W. Augsburg Academy, St. Paul, MN Used with permission.