Building Resiliency in Children and Youth

Children’s Mental Health Learning Series
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What I hope we can all agree on . . .
90 minutes from now

All children and youth have the capacity to develop and demonstrate healthy social and emotional functioning.

This session will:

• Describe some of the vulnerabilities unique to child and adolescent mental health
• Recognize the resiliency factors that promote social and individual capacities of children and youth
• Identify how families, schools, and communities are critical to nurturing developmental assets for all children and youth
The Ecological Model
A good figure is worth a thousand thoughts

1994

- Not vulnerable: 71.1%
- Vulnerable: 28.9%

1996

- Not vulnerable: 71.9%
- Vulnerable: 28.1%

National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)

A good figure is worth a thousand thoughts

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Not vulnerable
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Vulnerable
28.9%

56.2%
14.9%
15.7%

1996

Positive development
Resilient
Newly vulnerable
Long-term vulnerable

71.9%

The Many Faces of Vulnerable/At-Risk

The term *at-risk* has been used in various domains and settings, and there is a lack of consensus on meaning:

- mental health practitioners use it to define those suffering from emotional and adjustment problems
- educators use the term to denote students who are at risk of dropping out
- medical workers use it to refer to individuals with health problems
- economists use it to refer to workers who do not have requisite literacy skills for employment
Defining At-Risk

McWhirter et al. (1993) define at-risk as “a set of presumed cause/effect dynamics that place the individual child or family in danger of negative future events” (p. 6).

- a specific behavior, attitude, or deficiency provides the initial marker of later problem behavior
- at-risk designates a situation that is not necessarily current, but that can be anticipated in the absence of intervention
- best viewed as a series of steps in a continuum
# The At-Risk Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minimal risk</th>
<th>Remote risk</th>
<th>High risk</th>
<th>Imminent risk</th>
<th>At-risk category activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favorable demographics</td>
<td>Negative demographics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive family, school, and social interaction</td>
<td>Less positive family, school, and social interaction</td>
<td>Negative family, school, and social interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited psychosocial and environmental stressors</td>
<td>Some stressors</td>
<td>Numerous stressors</td>
<td>At risk for more intense maladaptive behavior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Development of personal at-risk markers: negative attitudes and emotions; skill deficiencies</td>
<td>Young person’s activity solidly places him or her in the at-risk category</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Development of gateway behaviors and activities</td>
<td>At risk for other categories</td>
<td>Progeny at risk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The At-Risk Continuum

**Minimal Risk:** families of high SES; few psychological stressors; access to good schools; loving, caring family relations

**Remote Risk:** low SES, member of ethnic minority; less than positive family, school, and social relations; these factors are additive

**High Risk:** characteristics added to above include depression, anxiety, aggression, and hopelessness, as well as deficits in social skills and coping behaviors
Anxiety rates by age and gender

Willms 2009
Depression rates by age and gender

Willms 2009
The At-Risk Continuum

Imminent Risk: individual high risk characteristic often find expression in participation in gateway behaviors (mildly or moderately distressing activities, frequently self-destructive, which progress to increasingly deviant behaviors)

At-Risk Activity: individuals at this level have actually passed beyond risk; they have the problems that define this category, and those who participate in one activity continue to be at risk for involvement in other categories
Alcohol, drug, tobacco, and sexual experience by age and gender
A good figure is worth a thousand thoughts

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  - Positive development: 56.2%
  - Resilient: 14.9%
  - Newly vulnerable: 15.7%

1996

- Vulnerable: 28.9%
  - Long-term vulnerable: 13.2%
  - Positive development: 71.9%
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National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)

Environmental Factors That Contribute to Risk

The trends most salient to at-risk children and families include the increasing incidence of:

• paternal job loss
• economic stagnation of the working poor (particularly among ethnic minorities)
• poverty among young families
• single mothers
• homeless families
Socioeconomic Status

Those in lowest SES group more likely to experience

- **health problems**: more likely to suffer neonatal damage, low birth weight and nutrition, untreated childhood illnesses
- **parent-child relations**: image of parents affected, child-rearing issues, parental lack of confidence
- **child abuse and neglect**: families are more isolated, no social networks
Family Problems and Problem Families

Family situations may place all family members, particularly children, in vulnerable

Stressed Families

• Blended families
• Latchkey families: 3-to-6 kids

Dysfunctional Families

• Families with substance-abuse issues
• Families who are violent or abusive
• Families with mental health issues
• Close family systems
The At-Risk Family System

Closed family systems typically demonstrate two major types of problems:

- **Detachment**: a family in which the individual members function separately and autonomously, with little family interdependence; boundaries are so rigid that only a high level of individual stress will activate support from other family members.

- **Enmeshment**: family members are overinvolved and overconcerned with each other’s lives; children experience a distorted sense of attachment and do not develop individuation or connectedness.
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National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)

Resiliency has been defined as “the capacity to cope effectively with the internal stresses of vulnerability and the external stress” (Werner & Smith, 1982)

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is:

• the capacity of individuals to *navigate* their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well being, and
• their capacity individually and in groups to *negotiate* for these resources to be provided
• in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2013)
Resources that build resiliency

- Cultural adherence
- Cohesion
- Identity
- Access to material resources
- Power & control
- Social justice

The diagram illustrates the interconnections between these resources, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to building resilience.
Social, Family, and Personality Factors

Social Environment
- school - supportive teachers, counselors
- community - ministers, older friend, etc.
- culture - especially for ethnic minorities

Family Milieu
- parents - communication, expectations
- support networks - church, parent’s friends

Personality Characteristics
- social skills, internal locus of control, healthy SE
- sense of humor, sense of purpose for future
Positive Youth Development

“Attaining success (thriving) is not the same as avoiding problems (risk).”

Frank Furstenberg et al., *Managing to Make It* (1999)

Despite extremely debilitating environmental, familial, and personal experiences, most children and youth have a trajectory of positive youth development.
A good figure is worth a thousand thoughts

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1.1996

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National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)

Two Shifts

**First Shift**

From fixing childrens’ problems to Promoting childrens’ strengths

**Second Shift**

Beyond programs to Relationships
A new way of thinking about our children and youth

The view from positive youth development (PYD)

– Youth are **valued and respected assets** to society
– Policies and programs focus on the evolving **developmental strengths** of youth
– Families, schools, and communities are engaged in **developing environments** that support youth
– Youth are involved in activities that enhance their **competence, connections, character, confidence, and contribution** to society (Lerner, 2005)
Positive youth development: The Developmental Asset Approach

• Since 1989, Search Institute has been conducting research to illuminate the positive relationships, opportunities, competencies, values, and self-perceptions that youth need to succeed

• SI’s framework of developmental assets has come about through the involvement of more than 1,000,000 youth in over 1000 communities

• Developmental assets are the building blocks that all youth need to be healthy, principled, and productive
What Are Developmental Assets?

External assets are relationships and opportunities that adults provide

- support
- empowerment
- boundaries and expectations
- constructive use of time

Internal Assets are competencies and values that youth develop internally

- commitment to learning
- positive values
- social competencies
- positive identity
What Are Developmental Assets?

• There are 40 assets grouped into these eight categories
• The presence/absence of these assets are compared against
  – developmental deficits (e.g., whether youth watch too much TV, victims of violence)
  – thriving indicators (e.g., school success, maintenance of physical health behavior)
  – high-risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, sexual intercourse, violence)
The power to protect

• The research has shown that the more of these assets young people have, the less likely they are to engage in risky behavior, and the more likely they are to engage in positive behaviors.

• The relationships between assets and youth well-being remain fairly consistent for adolescents across different races and ethnic groups, gender, age, SES, community size, and region.

• Having protective factors like assets is more influential in later positive outcomes than having risk factors as a young adolescent.
## Developmental Assets and High-Risk Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0-10 Assets</th>
<th>10-20 Assets</th>
<th>20-30 Assets</th>
<th>30-40 Assets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem alcohol use</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illicit drug use</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual activity</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Graph showing high-risk behavior percentages for different levels of developmental assets.](image-url)
Search Institute Thriving Indicators

Search Institute found that there were eight (8) empirically-derived indicators of thriving:

- Succeeding in school (not grades)
- Helping others (volunteerism)
- Values diversity
- Maintains good health
- Exhibits leadership
- Resists danger
- Delays gratification
- Overcomes adversity
## Developmental Assets and Thriving Indicators

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<th>20-30 Assets</th>
<th>30-40 Assets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Succeeds in school</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values diversity</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintains good health</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delays gratification</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exploring the evidence (NLSCY 2000)

Developmental Assets

- 53% of youth age 12 to 15 report high levels of both parental nurturance and 74% report a high level of school engagement

- 80% of youth age 12 to 17 report a high level of peer connectedness and 73% report involvement in volunteer activities

- Youth who volunteer report better self-rated health and self-worth and are less likely to report having used tobacco and marijuana than non-volunteers
Exploring the evidence (NLSCY 2000)

Youth who feel nurtured by their parents and who feel connected to their schools and their peers tend to report:

– better health, higher self-worth, and lower levels of anxiety
– less ever engaged in risky behaviours e.g., smoking, drinking alcohol, using marijuana, and associating with peers who commit crimes
– excellent or very good self-rated health status
# Developmental assets and mental health

## Chart 5.5 (data) Adolescents' psychological and health status and behaviours, by their positive assets, 2000/2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0 to 1 positive asset</th>
<th>2 to 3 positive assets</th>
<th>4 to 5 positive assets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low level of anxiety</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent or very good health</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High self-worth</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol use</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana use</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco use</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Adolescents aged 12 to 15. A positive asset is defined as a high level of parental nurturing; parental monitoring; school engagement; peer connectedness reported by a child; or as participation in a volunteer activity by a child in the past 12 months before the survey.

**Source:** Canadian Institute for Health Information analysis of Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth data.
Developmental assets and mental health

Chart 5.5 Adolescents’ psychological and health status and behaviours, by their positive assets, 2000/2001

Notes: Adolescents aged 12 to 15.

A positive asset is defined as a high level of parental nurturing, parental monitoring; school engagement; peer connectedness reported by a child; or as participation in a volunteer activity by a child in the past 12 months before the survey.

Source: Canadian Institute for Health Information analysis of Statistics Canada’s National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth data.
International Asset Building

Schwartz, 2014
Predicting Thriving in Urban Youth

Percent of Thriving Indicators Explained by Individual and Ecological Asset Factors

- Unexplained: 35%
- Individual: 41%
- Ecological: 24%

Schwartz & King, 2006
Building assets in children and youth

Cultivate community readiness, energy, and commitment

• A shared vision that unites sectors
• Common purpose and commitment
• Collective efficacy
• Public will to invest in children and youth
• Social trust
Building assets in children and youth

Create an operational infrastructure
• Convene, network, and organize committed leaders
• Communicate broadly
• Provide tools, training, and technical assistance
• Conduct planning, decision-making, and governance
• Access resources
• Celebrate and recognize asset-building efforts
Building assets in children and youth

Some asset-building activities we can do TODAY

1. Build relationships between youth and caring adults
   - Provide support and education to parents e.g., Triple-P Parenting Program
   - Access support for families to engage their children in extra-curricular activities e.g., sports, arts, social justice
   - Invest in family-school partnerships that connect children with teachers in meaningful ways
Building assets in children and youth

Some asset-building activities we can do TODAY

2. Focus on relationship skills and social competence
   - Develop empathy and perspective-taking e.g., Roots of Empathy
   - Develop social skills program relevant to age and gender e.g., cyber-etiquette, gaming ethics
   - Work with schools to incorporate emotional self-regulation into curriculum e.g., School-Based Mental Health (Kutcher)
Building assets in children and youth

Some asset-building activities we can do TODAY

3. Give opportunities for children and youth to lead
   - Actively recruit leaders (bullies?) to give leadership to activities that build confidence
   - Create opportunities for students to risk and fail e.g., *Too Safe for Their Own Good* (Ungar)
   - Utilize community organizations (e.g., churches, community centers) in providing youth places to serve and lead
Six Keys to Developmental Asset Building

1. Everyone can build assets.
2. All young people have assets.
3. Relationships are key.
4. Asset-building is an ongoing process.
5. Consistent messages are important.
6. Intentional redundancy is important.
Critical References


Evidence-Based Websites

Lions Quest Canada: Centre for Positive Youth Development: [http://www.lionsquest.ca/](http://www.lionsquest.ca/)


DO YOUR PART!