

## The Power of Early Intervention

Mental health disorders are the most common health issues faced by American school-aged children (K-12), yet most go undiagnosed or untreated. According to the American Psychological Association, “The impact of child mental health on child development and society as a whole is well documented but under recognized”. When our children and teenagers show signs and symptoms of physical illness, one of our first responses is to take them to a physician to be evaluated. Whether a broken bone, the flu or a more serious health condition like diabetes or cancer, we don’t let our youth suffer, instead we follow the guidance of trained physicians and seek help. However, when our youth are struggling with a mental or emotional health condition, we aren’t as quick to react and miss opportunities to relieve their “suffering”. 1 in 5 (20%) youth have a diagnosable emotional, behavioral or mental health disorder, yet 2/3 are NOT getting the help they need (National Alliance on Mental Illness).



Our mental and emotional wellbeing is every bit as critical to our overall health as our physical wellbeing. Mental illness does not affect emotional health in isolation. Research confirms the relationship between mental health issues and poor outcomes such as suicide, self-harm, substance abuse, suspension, dropping out of school, and involvement with the Juvenile Justice System. When mental health disorders go unrecognized and left untreated, youth are at greater risk for poor academic, social and behavioral outcomes.

The good news is, mental health problems are treatable. Early intervention is our best defense, helping improve resilience and the ability to succeed in school and life. Early detection of childhood and adolescence mental health problems, timely referral and access to appropriate services can reduce the risk of long term consequences and improve outcomes in multiple domains of life (including family dynamics). The first step in early intervention is recognizing signs of concern. These may include but are not limited to:

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks.
- Trying to harm or kill oneself or making plans to do so.
- Out-of-control, risk-taking behaviors that can cause harm to self or others.
- Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart, physical discomfort or fast breathing.
- Not eating, throwing up or using laxatives to lose weight; significant weight loss or gain.
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships.
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol.
- Drastic changes in behavior, personality or sleeping habits.
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities like hanging out with friends or going to school.
- Extreme difficulty in concentrating or staying still that can lead to failure in school.

Schools and parents alike play an important role in identifying and connecting students to supports. Programs like SCIP (School Community Intervention and Prevention), provide parents and educators with tools and resources to aid in the identification and intervention process. Navigating the mental and behavioral healthcare system can sometimes be overwhelming for children and families. Utilizing school and community resources that are in place can assist families in addressing barriers and challenges in accessing appropriate services.

### **Tips for Parents:**

- Care for your children’s mental health just as you do for their physical health.
- Pay attention to warning signs, and seek help if you are concerned.
- Let your children know that everyone experiences pain, fear, sadness, worry and anger and that these emotions are a normal part of life; encourage open communication about feelings, concerns and emotions.
- Provide your children with opportunities to problem solve and learn coping skills.
- Be a role model- talk about your own feelings, apologize, don’t express anger with violence and use active problem-solving skills.
- Encourage your children’s talents and skills, while also accepting their limitations.
- Celebrate accomplishments.

### **Tips for Schools:**

- Think about mental health as an important component of learning and success in the classroom.
- Know the warning signs of mental illness and take note of these in your students and seek consultation from school mental health practitioners or social workers.
- Utilize community resources and mental health professionals within your school to help educate staff on prevention, early identification and intervention of youth mental health.
- Utilize SCIP and other school based mental health supports.
- Encourage social-emotional learning within your classrooms
- Build trusting relationships with the children and families you work with. When concerns arise, utilize positive communication, active listening and parental engagement strategies to address concerns.

References: National Alliance on Mental Illness; American Psychological Association; National Center for Mental Health Checkups at Columbia University; Mental Health America; Association for Children’s Mental Health; Child Mind Institute

## Drug and Alcohol Prevention: Talk Early and Often

Did you know 83% of youth say their parents are the leading influence in their choice to not drink? Parents play a key role in preventing alcohol or drug use amongst youth. While there are several ways to help prevent the use of alcohol and drugs (fostering healthy and responsible attitudes, encouraging supportive relationships, fostering the development of positive interests and showing kids that their decisions matter), one of the best strategies parents can engage in is talking openly and honestly with their youth. Research shows that kids who have conversations with their parents and learn about the dangers of alcohol and drug use are 50% less likely to use alcohol and drugs than those who don't have such conversations (National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc.). The challenge for many isn't recognizing the importance of these conversations, but knowing when and how to engage in discussions about alcohol and drugs with their kids. A simple rule of thumb: It's never too early to start. Even at young ages, parents can take advantage of "teachable moments" when alcohol or drug issues come up on TV, in the movies, on the news, or in conversations. The younger the child, the more help they will need to make sense of the information. Below are some basic guidelines that can assist parents in having conversations about drugs and alcohol.



### Ages 5-8

- **Let your child know how you feel about tobacco, alcohol and other drugs:** Keep your conversations factual and focused on the present (future consequences are too distant to have any meaning). For example, let them know that being high on alcohol or drugs makes it harder to play ball, finish a puzzle or do things they enjoy.
- **Talk to your child about drug-related messages in the media:** Ask your child whether different ads, TV shows or videos make drugs seem cool and acceptable, or whether they also show their adverse effects. Encourage your child to ask questions or share concerns about the things they are seeing or hearing.
- **Set clear family rules about drug use and examine your own actions:** Tell children why you don't want them to take drugs, drink or smoke. Try to be a good role model. Actions always speak louder than words.
- **Help kids build problem-solving skills:** If your child is having trouble with homework, a friendship or bully at school, help them pinpoint the problem and find long-term solutions. Point out that "quick fixes" don't often work.
- **Get to know your child's friends and their parents:** Check in by phone or visit every once in a while to make sure that these families share the same values as you do about alcohol and drugs (This a good rule to follow for all ages).

### Ages 8-12

- **Keep in mind that the tween and pre-teen years is one of the most important times in a child's life to have conversations about drug and alcohol use:** This is the time when kids need your advice and input more than ever as they start to form their own opinions and thoughts surrounding important issues.

- **Make sure your child knows your rules about drug use and the consequences if they're broken:** Kids this age can understand the reason for rules and appreciate having limits in place. Research shows that children are less likely to use substances if their parents have established a pattern of setting clear rules and consequences for breaking them.
- **Teach your child to say “no”:** Kids need to know how to not give in to peer pressure and get out of uncomfortable situations. Brainstorm some solutions your child may use if offered alcohol or drugs. It is also important to talk to your child about the risk associated with maintaining friendships with kids who choose to use drugs or alcohol.
- **Help build your child's self-esteem:** Puberty can be a time of vulnerability and insecurity, putting kids at greater risk for giving into peer pressure. During these years, provide your child with lots of positive reinforcements, praise their successes and recognize good decisions they are making.
- **Base drug and alcohol related messages on facts not fear:** Facts are more likely to sink in during the long term.
- **Keep your conversations in “present tense”:** Due to brain development, tweens and preteens aren't concerned with future problems that might result from experimenting with alcohol and drugs. Focus on how using drugs or alcohol could be harmful to them in the present.
- **Help children separate reality from fantasy:** Watch television and movies with your kids and ask lots of questions to reinforce the distinction between what is real and what is fictional.
- **Encourage healthy activities:** Look for ways to get your child involved in sports, hobbies, school clubs, music and other activities that reduce boredom and excess free time. Encourage positive friendships and interests and look for activities that you and your child can do together.

### Ages 13-18

Many of the previously discussed suggestions also apply to teenagers when addressing alcohol and drug concerns, but below are some special suggestions to consider for this savvy age group.

- **Communicate your expectations surrounding alcohol and drug use:** Make sure your teen knows the consequences for going against your expectations and enforce those consequences when rules are broken. Kids who are not regularly monitored by their parents are 4 times more likely to use drugs.
- **Make it clear that you disapprove of alcohol and drug use:** Remind your teens of the negative consequences of using alcohol and drugs as well as the positive benefits of abstaining from substance use.
- **Provide your teen with positive reinforcement:** Teens need to hear lots of positive comments about their life and who they are as individuals.
- **Show interest and discuss your teens daily ups and downs:** This will help you earn your child's trust and learn how to talk with each other.
- **Don't just leave your teens anti-drug education up to their school:** Ask your teen what they have learned about drugs in school and then build on that with additional topics such as, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, positive approaches to stress reduction and peer relationships.

References: Partnership for a Drug-Free America; American Academy of Pediatrics; National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc.

# 40 Developmental Assets...Why They Matter

## **Developmental Assets: Preparing Youth for Success**

The Search Institute has worked with schools, programs, families, and communities in using the Developmental Assets framework to measure and increase the external supports and internal strengths students need to grow and be successful in and outside of school. The framework of Developmental Assets combines a research-based approach to child/youth development with concrete and doable ways that communities can work together to help students succeed and flourish in and outside of school.

## **The Developmental Assets**

The Developmental Assets are 40 research-based, positive experiences and qualities that influence a student's development, helping them become caring, responsible, and productive adults. Centered in youth development, resiliency, and prevention research, the Developmental Assets' framework has proven to be effective and has become the most widely used approach to positive youth development in the United States and in many other areas around the world. The framework has been adapted to be developmentally and age appropriate from early childhood through adolescence.

## **Who needs them? Why are They Important?**

Studies of more than 5 million youth consistently show that the more assets that young people have, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors and the more likely they are to succeed in and outside of school. Research shows that youth with a higher number of assets are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors that include problem alcohol use, illicit drug use, violence, and sexual activity. And not only are they less likely to partake in risky behaviors, they are more likely to do well in school, be involved in improving and growing their communities, and tend to value diversity.

## **How Many Assets do Youth Need?**

The positive impact of having these assets is shown across all cultural and socioeconomic groups of youth in the United States as well as other parts of the world. It also has proven to be a better indicator of high-risk behaviors than poverty, family structure, or other demographic measures.

What we know is that youth with 31–40 assets tend to do much better in life socially, emotionally, and academically. However, we also know, the average youth has 20 or less of these 40 assets.

Here is a breakdown in percentage of where youth fall in relation to the number of assets they have.

20% of children have between 0 & 10 assets

42% of children have between 11 & 20 assets

30% of children have between 21 & 30 assets

8% of children have between 31 & 40 assets

The good news is parents, teachers, neighbors etc. have the ability to positively impact and add to a youth's asset number.

Below is a list of the 40 Developmental Assets. While the list provided is specifically for youth between the ages of 12-18, you can go to [www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18](http://www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18) to find lists for **3-5**; **5-9**; **9-12** year old youths.

## The Search Institutes 40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents (age 12-18)

### EXTERNAL ASSETS

#### SUPPORT

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 parents.
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 the child succeed in school.

#### EMPOWERMENT

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, school, and in the neighborhood.

#### BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS

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

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 community organizations.
19. **Religious Community** | Young person spends one hour or more 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.

# INTERNAL ASSETS

## COMMITMENT TO LEARNING

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

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.

## SOCIAL COMPETENCIES

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

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.

This list is an educational tool. It is not intended to be nor is it appropriate as a scientific measure of the developmental assets of individuals.

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[www.partnersforhealthyyouth.com/40-assets](http://www.partnersforhealthyyouth.com/40-assets)

[www.search-institute.org/what-we-study/developmental-assets](http://www.search-institute.org/what-we-study/developmental-assets)

<https://www.glcyd.org/category/40-developmental-assets/>