

Listening to Young People Findings from the 2009 Developmental Assets Survey of Arlington Youth

Do young people in Arlington County have what they need to grow into healthy, caring, and responsible adults? A March 2009 survey of about 2000 students in 8th 10th and 12th grades found that just ten percent have the “Developmental Assets” they need for the best chance of succeeding in life.

What are Developmental Assets? They are 40 positive opportunities, experiences, skills, values and relationships. The assets were identified by Search Institute using research on why some young people thrive during adolescence while others flounder. It’s not just a matter of luck or personality or even good parenting. Compared to those with just a few, young people with 30 or more Developmental Assets are far more likely to make smart choices, avoid risk behaviors, and adopt a healthy lifestyle.

Data from Arlington back up this research. For example, 94 percent of young people with many Developmental Assets (31 to 40) said they pay attention to healthy nutrition and exercise, compared to only 26 percent of youth with few assets (10 or fewer). Only four percent of youth with 31 to 40 Developmental Assets had gotten drunk in the previous two weeks compared to 40 percent of those with 0 to 0 assets.

For more information on Developmental Assets, to request a workshop or obtain a brochure, contact Mary Ann Moran, Assets Liaison, at (703) 228-1671.

Few Young People Report the Ideal Level of Assets

As in earlier surveys, the 2009 results show that few Arlington youth have the ideal level of assets. Only nine percent of young people in grades 8, 10 and 12 report 30 to 40 Assets. Most young people are struggling with less than half.

Why do so many young people have so few assets? There are many reasons but family communication appears to be a real problem. Only 29 percent of young people – and only 20 percent of high school youth – report regular and positive communication, despite high levels of family support (reported by 70 percent of youth)

But assets reflect the characteristics of a community, not just families. Other problem areas include a lack of adult role models, too few opportunities for youth to serve others or be a resource, and the perception that the community doesn’t value youth. These problems tend to be worse for older teens – while 43 percent of 8th graders report caring neighbors, only 30 percent of 12th graders do.

Older Youth Have Fewer Assets

This pattern, in which older youth report fewer assets, holds for 19 of the 20 “external” assets that are provided to youth by adults and peers in the community. For example, 30 percent of 8th grade students but only 14 percent of 12th graders report “parent involvement in schooling.” The

same pattern is found in other communities conducting the Assets Survey. Does this mean that the decline simply reflects normal development? Researchers at Search Institute think not.

Studies show that young people need the assets throughout adolescence. They especially need to develop the internal values and interpersonal skills that should guide their decisions as adults. But many do not. According to the 2009 survey, only about one-third of 12th grade students report planning and decision-making skills and only slightly more report resistance (i.e. staying away from dangerous situations.) Less than half report interpersonal competence (i.e. empathy and friendship skills) and peaceful conflict resolution.

A Gender Gap in Assets

With the exceptions of safety, self-esteem and parent involvement in schooling, boys are less likely than girls to report an asset, when there's a significant difference. The largest differences between boys and girls are in the internal assets. For example, 76 percent of girls but only 60 percent of boys report "achievement motivation" and 58 percent of girls but only 33 percent of boys report "interpersonal competence."

Some Community Strengths

The survey did find many strengths in the developmental foundation of our community. Sixty percent or more of high school youth feel safe, actively participate in sports, clubs and other activities, spend time on homework, care about their school and doing well academically, stand up for their beliefs, and are honest and responsible with a positive view of their future and a concern for equality and justice.

Key Advice for Parents: Stay involved! Our survey results point to one very clear conclusion: Parents need to stay involved in the lives of young people *throughout* the teen years. This can be hard when young people seem to be pushing away. But what happens -- literally --when there's nothing to push against? Older teens continue to need support, boundaries, and to feel valued by the community.

Another strength is the relatively high level of assets reported by students in 6th grade. Past surveys in Arlington and those of other communities have consistently shown that asset levels are highest in 6th grade. This finding suggests that our community is providing a supportive environment for children during the elementary school years. We don't have to start from scratch – simply find ways to maintain high assets levels through middle school and beyond.

Matching parent, educational, and community practices to developmental realities is a good first step. Adults who live and work with youth often don't have a good grasp on the many physical, emotional and cognitive changes taking place during adolescence. Ways of being involved in school that "work" for a third grader may not be at all appropriate for an eighth grader. But the answer is not to stop trying to be involved. The answer is finding a more appropriate way.

Working for Change

The Partnership is working to increase assets and better ways to support youth in our community. To find out more, please visit our Web site at www.arlingtonpartnershipforyouth.org or contact Ben Harris, Coordinator for the Partnership at 703-228-1667.