



Mobilize Young People

Tapping Their Power to Build Assets Themselves

At the center of the five action strategies (Chapter Five) is mobilizing young people to use their power as asset builders and change agents. Rather than viewing young people only as recipients of programs, services, and good will, this emphasis on mobilization recognizes them as resources to their families, peers, communities, schools, congregations, youth organizations, neighborhoods, and other settings where they invest themselves. Moreover, no one has more of a stake in asset building than young people themselves, so they often bring particular energy, passion, and commitment to a community's asset-building efforts.

The emphasis on mobilizing youth reflects an important, but neglected, theme in child and adolescent development. Systems and ecological models of development hold that individuals are both the product and the producer of their environment, and that it is the relationship between the individual and environment that influences development. As Stephen Hamilton and his colleagues note, "Human beings develop through active engagement with their environment; by making choices and shaping that environment, they also direct their own development."¹ Furthermore, they also have a significant influence on the contexts in which they live (family, school, neighborhood, and others) and thus are significant (and underused) resources for creating the kinds of relationships, contexts, ecologies, and communities that enable positive youth development.²

Far too much education, child and youth work, social work, and parent education (to name a few) tacitly presumes that the process of raising strong, healthy, and motivated children and adolescents involves responsible, knowledgeable adults “filling up” young people with wisdom and truth. Our perspective is that asset building happens best in the fusion of an active, engaged, competent person with receptive, supportive, nurturing people and ecologies. These interactions—particularly if they are frequent and sustained—can be vital to young people’s optimal development (their strong base of Developmental Assets) while also contributing significantly to creating a more vibrant and civil society.

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Thus, mobilizing young people for asset building is an essential strategy for creating an asset-building community. This strategy has three distinct (though dynamically interrelated and mutually reinforcing) facets. The most common one we’ve seen in communities is mobilizing them as leaders and partners in asset-building efforts, essentially tapping them as resources for community change. Just as important (and often neglected) are two other roles: strengthening their own foundation of Developmental Assets and being asset builders for their peers and younger children. We begin our discussion with the latter two, emphasizing the importance of the informal, relational roles young people play in an asset-building movement.

NURTURING THEIR OWN DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS

The emphasis on engaging young people as major actors in their own asset building grows out of a major emphasis in current developmental studies on the fusion of person and social contexts. This engagement is a two-way street, with young people active in changing their contexts and contexts changing young people. It needs to be a dynamic interplay of give and take. Taking this theme seriously challenges an idea deeply rooted in our psyche: that development is all about what environments (including family, school, peers, and media) do to young people.

This is only part of what happens. The other part emphasizes how well young people are positioned, encouraged, and equipped to promote their own development.

When they are young children, kids are quite dependent on parents and other adults to provide for them, care for them, and help keep them safe. Even then, they influence how adults respond to them with a reciprocal interaction.³ As they grow and mature, they make more and more choices on their own that shape who they are and who they are becoming, so that by adolescence they are making many decisions on their own (with input and guidance, in the best cases, from a web of caring adults) that will have a tremendous influence on their future. As we wrote in *What Teens Need to Succeed* (an asset-building guide for teenagers):

You might think you have little or no control over your own life. Parents, teachers, and other adults seem to have all the power. . . . Some adults might treat you with suspicion or look down on you just because you're a teenager. Factor in Circumstances Beyond Your Control—violence, prejudice, poverty, crime, injustice, ignorance—and you may feel as if there's nothing you can do about anything.

Not true. You've got the power—to take a look at your own life, celebrate the good parts, identify the problem areas, plan your future, decide your direction, and shape your own success. Plus you've got the power to make a real difference in the lives of people around you.⁴

Young people build their own assets in many ways: by being reflective on their choices and priorities, deciding how they spend their time, and selecting the people (young and old) with whom they spend time. Parents and other caring adults can ask questions and share experiences that help young people sort through the complexities of growing up. If appropriately designed, programs and activities can support young people in this personal process of learning and growth. In these efforts, a focus on furnishing tools, skills, and opportunities for self-reflection can help young people discover how they can internalize the assets that are being cultivated by others and also become proactive in filling gaps they identify in their own lives. Peers, parents, and others around them either facilitate or interfere with these efforts and choices. As my colleague K. L. Hong writes in her book for teens: “Fortunately, we each have the power to light our own way, and no one else can turn the light on for us: not a boyfriend or a girlfriend, not a parent or a teacher, not a boss or a friend or anyone else (although they can sometimes help by ‘pointing to

the switch’). . . . I can put off decisions, and I can let other people make decisions for me, but eventually, it all comes back to me.”⁵

The other dimensions of mobilizing young people—building assets with peers and younger children, and becoming a leader or asset champion—include the added benefit of young people building their own assets, even though that may not be the focus. Rather than focusing attention only on self-improvement, the best balance likely includes encouraging young people to build assets for and with others and to be active as leaders, while also making opportunities available for young people to reflect on how those experiences built their own assets in the process.

Building Assets with Peers and Younger Children

Research consistently shows that young people have significant influence over their peers. Though many studies emphasize the role of negative peer pressure, others are highlighting the potential of positive peer influence.⁶ Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Search Institute’s research shows almost two-thirds of adolescents (63 percent) saying that their best friends model responsible behavior, suggesting that positive peer influence can be tapped to strengthen community for young people, many of whom are most likely to turn first to peers for advice and support.

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One way to capitalize on this influence is to recognize and foster young people’s capacity and motivation to be asset builders for their peers as well as for younger children. Doing so requires helping young people become aware of their power to be a positive influence, holding up the value of helping others so it becomes more normative, and nurturing young people’s relationship-building capacities so that they have skills to offer basic, healthy support, care, and guidance when it’s needed.

A peer-helping approach can be effectively used to strengthen young people in relational skills such as conversation, decision making, and other skills for building one-to-one relationships. As Barbara B. Varenhorst, a founder of the peer-helping movement, writes in a guide for linking peer helping and asset building:

“Simply put, peer helping is young people helping other young people. Youth have the power to make a real difference in the lives of the people around them. When young people have troubles, frustrations, concerns, worries, or life events that affect them, they often turn to peers rather than adults for help. A peer-helping program teaches students skills that strengthen what they have to offer peers. Trainees learn how to effectively provide help, practical assistance, and support to those in need.”⁷

Keith Pattinson, an asset champion in British Columbia, Canada, tells about organizing an asset-building workshop for students in grades six and seven. They expected only about 40 young people, but four local schools registered 330 students. During the workshop, young people were asked to commit to the ways they would help kids their own age and younger. At the end of the initial time allowed, the students asked for more time, and organizers were concerned that the young people were having trouble coming up with ways to help. But at the end of the extended time, volunteers were asked to report on some of what they would do, and it turned out the young people had needed more time because they had so *many* ideas: the 330 young people had generated more than twenty-five hundred commitments. Some samples:

I'll tie little kids' shoelaces.

I'll give them a “putup” instead of a putdown.

I'll stick up for someone younger.

I'll help others learn what they can do to be asset builders.

I'll let them borrow something if they need it.

I'll never say rude comments.

I'll help those who are crying at school.

I'll say hi when I pass by.⁸

Perhaps no single one of these commitments is in itself profound, but the young people's interest and excitement had a profound effect on the adults involved. The cumulative power of all these small, one-on-one, everyday acts of asset building could easily translate into a significant part of creating an asset-building community. Even in a single hour-and-a-half workshop, young people clearly discovered their own capacity and responsibility to help others and be asset builders themselves.

In a more intense process, young people in the rural communities of Lawton and Fort Still, Oklahoma, teach their peers about substance abuse prevention and

sexuality. Aware of the sensitivity of the issue, the organizers worked with local congregations to launch the program.

Each year, forty young people are recruited to learn communication and leadership skills as well as information on how to present to their peers on high-risk behavior. The program includes a formal application process and a weeklong leadership training camp in which they learn about teen pregnancy and substance abuse prevention, public speaking, cultural sensitivity, and family dynamics. Then teens sign a contract, agreeing to make a certain number of presentations; participate in community service; abstain from sexual activity and use of alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs; and treat each other respectfully. At the end of the year, they have a banquet to celebrate their accomplishments. “Our training is the key element to the success of our program,” explains Lisa Stein, who initiated the program in the early 1990s. “Youth feel competent when they go out.”⁹

Being Leaders and Asset Champions in Communities and Organizations

Some people have a hard time imagining children and teenagers having much to contribute to community life and asset building. They are used to seeing young people portrayed as apathetic and problematic, not creative and resourceful. Joe Nathan and Jim Kielsmeier write:

Unlike earlier generations, which viewed young people as active, productive, and needed members of the household and community, adults today tend to treat them as objects, as problems, or as the recipients (not the deliverers) of services. Young people are treated as objects when they are routinely classified as a separate group, isolated in age-based institutions, and beset on all sides by advertising—though not otherwise recognized or treated with respect. They are treated as problems when they are feared, criticized, and made the focus of prevention and remedial programs. They are treated as recipients of services when they are viewed as creatures to be pitied, “fixed,” and controlled.¹⁰

The reality is quite different from the stereotypes and preconceptions. Young people actually volunteer much more regularly than most adults. In fact, the Corporation for National and Community Service reports that 55 percent of U.S. twelve- to eighteen-year-olds volunteered during 2004, compared to only 29 percent of adults (though youth volunteers typically spend less time volunteering than the adults who volunteer).¹¹

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Mobilizing young people as leaders and change agents involves more than providing positive opportunities for youth. It means actively engaging them as leaders and contributors, which not only benefits young people's own development (from acquiring new skills and confidence as well as nurturing their spirit as they see themselves connecting to something larger than themselves) but also strengthens the community and those touched by the efforts. When Assets for Colorado Youth and OMNI Institute asked young people in focus groups what youth engagement meant to them, they said:

- Adults share some degree of power with youth.
- Youth have significant levels of responsibility.
- Youth are viewed as actors and major players (not just as recipients).
- Youth act on opportunities.
- Adults and youth work together.
- Strong, enduring relationships exist between youth and adults.
- Strong, enduring relationships exist among youth.
- An adult asset champion is present.
- A youth asset champion is present.¹²

In our work with asset-building communities, we consistently find that those who take youth seriously as partners, leaders, spokespeople, and activists tend to have more energetic, impactful initiatives. As Betsy Ferries, cochair of the asset-building initiative in Essex, Vermont, says, “The biggest mistake for a community initiative to make . . . is to develop a youth initiative without youth.”¹³ Indeed, Search Institute’s National Asset-Building Case Study Project concluded that three principles were crucial:

1. Learn to work “with” young people rather than conducting activities “for” them.

2. Create an atmosphere that sparks young people's aspirations.
3. Incorporate key elements of authentic youth engagement, including ensuring that young people are valued and heard, that they shape the action agenda, and that they intentionally build assets for and with each other.¹⁴

Asset-building communities use many methods and strategies to enhance youth engagement, among them leadership development, volunteering, service-learning, youth in governance, and other approaches that link young people to the broader context as resources and change agents. Here are some examples that suggest the range of possibilities.

Youth in Governance. Since the early 1990s, up to six hundred young people in the port city of Hampton, Virginia, have been actively engaged each year in leadership, policy, and decision making, thanks to a citywide commitment to youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships. "Neighborhoods have rallied behind the idea of assets because it's very positive-based, very validating, easily understood, user-friendly, and it transcends age, academic level, and socioeconomic group," according to Maria Perkins, youth and community development director with Alternatives, Inc., a nonprofit agency specializing in youth-adult partnerships.

Over the years, Hampton has experimented with various models of youth representation on boards and commissions. Currently, at least four models are in use. Youth representatives serve on local commissions for the arts, parks and recreation, neighborhoods, and school climate. Youth advisory groups report to the superintendent of schools and the city's environmental relations office. Two high school students are employed in the planning department as youth planners.

The model that Hampton deems most successful is parallel process, in which youth and adults first tackle part of a problem among their peers rather than in mixed-age groups. Early in Hampton's strategic planning efforts, youth and adult groups separately brainstormed and then prioritized the needs of the city. Though the racial mix of the groups was similar, and Hampton's half-black, half-white racial mix had been and still was stable, young people ranked race relations a top priority, while the adults did not even list the issue. The adults quickly recognized the wisdom of the youth input.

Mixed boards can function well, but Hampton has also witnessed its share of horror stories, said Cindy Carlson, director of the Hampton Coalition for Youth.

“One kid gets on a board with 20 adults. The adults don’t listen, the kid gets bored and drops out. It reinforces everyone’s negative opinions.”

Youth holding a seat at a decision-making table and being taken seriously does not happen overnight, as youth commissioner Harmonie Mason can attest. At first, Mason said, young people at city hall needed to overcome the “oh, they’re so cute” response. Mason then articulates the kind of response youth want from adults they work with: “We don’t want you to give us things because we’re cute. We want you to give us things because you understand the importance of what we’re asking.”

The Hampton infrastructure includes many levels of participation, and mentoring and training are available at each level to help newcomers climb the ladder of increasing responsibility. Adults serve as resources, helping to create workable systems and supporting the young people as needed. Creating a caring culture that empowers youth means offering a variety of options for involvement. “Our challenge,” says Johnny Pauls, director of secondary education for the schools, “is to cast the net so it’s spread over more students. It’s not enough to have a hundred kids involved; we want to have all seventeen hundred. The more kids who get involved, the better we’ll be.”

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Youth as Researchers. In New Jersey, fifteen young people are taking the lead in making their community asset-rich. Through the Somerset Hills YMCA, based in Basking Ridge, young people have been transforming the community through two youth-led Developmental Assets efforts.

They have been taking the asset message into the community by doing asset mapping. Using mapping software and training that was part of an IMPACT PLUS grant, fifteen young people visited local businesses, restaurants, and community organizations to educate business owners about Developmental Assets and survey them with a Developmental Assets inventory. By doing this mapping project, young people are helping community residents, business owners, and others become more intentional about building assets. They have completed mapping the community of Bernardsville and are now mapping Basking Ridge.



EMPOWERING YOUTH THROUGHOUT THE COMMUNITY STRATFORD, CONNECTICUT

Each month, members of the Stratford Youth and Family Advisory Board meet to talk about issues and create ways to bring out the best in children, youth, and families in this Connecticut town. Young people and adults work together on the board, and high school senior Hector Soriano and an adult cochair the committee. “This year we had more kids who wanted to be on this board than we had positions,” says Tamara Trojanowski, assistant director of Stratford Community Services. About a dozen young people serve on the board.

Each year, the board reviews grant proposals for youth service projects. (They give a maximum of \$250 for each project.) Trojanowski says these grants give young people the message that what they’re doing matters. “We say that we’re counting on you to make a difference—right now,” she says. “You don’t have to wait until you’re an adult to contribute.” In the past few years, the board has made grants to a youth organization planning a variety show to raise funds for a prom for students with special needs, a Layers of Love project (which involved students making blankets and distributing them to newborn intensive care units in the area), and a project to publish a youth literary magazine with submissions from forty young people.

Young people on the board also present Youth as Resources Awards each year to outstanding asset-building businesses, adult volunteer groups, adult volunteers, youth groups, and youth volunteers in the community. More than two hundred people pack the town chamber to learn who has won these awards. A few of the winners have been:

- The local Wal-Mart for giving minigrants to teachers to go beyond the curriculum
- The Home Depot for providing volunteers and funds to transform the community’s miniature golf course
- An adult volunteer who offered a weekly evening story time, called Pajamorama, where children wearing pajamas and carrying a stuffed animal come with their families to hear a bedtime story
- A youth volunteer who constructed a food pantry at the South End Community Center and coordinated seven food drives to stock the pantry with three thousand pounds of food

- A middle school group that assembled one thousand care packages for the local breast care center
- The Stratford United Methodist Church Youth Fellowship, which earned \$3,600 through a thirty-hour hunger banquet to raise awareness and funds for starving children around the world

“The students who serve on the board really see how their contributions are valued and how their perspectives are valued and heard,” Trojanowski says. “These are bright, articulate, and compassionate kids who have a lot to offer and are making a great contribution.”

The second is an asset-building speaker’s bureau. In addition to creating the presentations, young people do all the facilitating. In the past year, they’ve completed the in-service training for the Somerset Hills School District, training the teachers and the administrators in the Developmental Assets framework. They have also trained the YMCA board of directors, the Bernardsville Chamber of Commerce, the YMCA staff, and the Bernardsville Town Council. “This is really about flipping things upside down,” says Carolyn Vasquez, YMCA community outreach director, who oversees this asset-building work. “The kids are teaching the adults.

“The asset approach gives backbone in giving youth a voice to effect change in a community,” Vasquez says. “The youth are more aware of their community as a whole, and they’re becoming more involved little by little to create change.”

Program Leadership and Development. As part of the Brimbank Youth Services YMCA in Melbourne, Australia, program leaders wanted to create a camping program run by young people for young people. Youth who had attended a leadership camp and a leadership youth group came together to develop this new asset-building leadership camp.

The group met for three months and discussed every aspect of running a camp: booking a location, identifying resources, providing programming for the entire camp, budgeting, creating timeframes, and evaluating the camp. They advertised through schools to select fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds to attend the camp. One of the leaders of the camp, nineteen-year-old Rennie Sundram, donated \$2,500 (which he received for being named Australian Volunteer of the Year) so that participants would not have to pay a fee to attend the camp.

“The asset building for young people in this particular program is amazing,” says James Wynd, manager of Brimbank Youth Services YMCA, who was one of two adult staff members who went on the camp and was involved with the youth planning process.

In the end, the camp, held in Cowes, Philip Island, was a success. Participants gave high rankings to all the asset-building activities, and their major complaint was that the camp was too short. Young people who led the camp stayed involved in the process long after it ended. They were involved in an evaluation, and the written program evaluation clearly highlighted how the camp built all eight categories of assets.

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Youth as Communicators. In 2000, the Marquette-Alger Youth Foundation surveyed young people in Marquette and Alger Counties of Michigan to measure the number of assets young people have. After the results were released, 8–18 Media, a nonprofit youth development program, recruited young people in the community between the ages of eight and eighteen to choose stories about asset building to cover, do the research, conduct interviews, write stories, and edit them.

8–18 Media assigned young people between the ages of eight and thirteen to be reporters and others ages fourteen to eighteen to be editors and guide the reporters’ work. Reporters tape-recorded all their interviews and transcribed the interviews before writing the stories.

Once they were finished, 8–18 Media posted the stories on the Internet. Each asset-building story reveals what young people in the counties have to say about a particular asset, an asset category, or the survey results.

Youth as Philanthropists. Greater Orlando’s Healthy Community Initiative established a youth Legacy Venture Team in which young people are trained in all aspects of grant making, including reviewing grant applications for asset-building projects and awarding funding. Each year, the team assesses community issues and

picks a focus, with asset building always being part of the mix. Teams of young people award funds in specific areas. In its first three years, the students (who are in grades nine to twelve) gave \$275,000 to asset-building projects in central Florida, ranging from a summer science class to an after-school tutoring project led by seven elementary students.

In the process, the young people learn a lot about what it means to be civically involved and to be a leader. “My involvement in my community has grown,” said Lauren Wolf, one of the students. “I now understand the importance of voting and participating in city activities in order to have a voice in my community. . . . I now have my eyes set upon helping the community in some form—whether it’s through philanthropy or service.”

Service-learning. When Brian Elkins, in grade nine at Colorado Academy in southwest Denver, heard about Developmental Assets, he believed the framework offered a great opportunity to fulfill his community service requirement for graduation. So he worked with his teacher and eleven classmates to identify a project that would integrate the assets with service.

They ended up painting a mural at the Catholic Charities Mulroy Neighborhood Center. “Each part of the mural shows what parents can do to support their children,” he says. “Share, smile a lot, be proud of their work, and read to them.” The positive messages inspired by asset building have left a lasting mark on the neighborhood center.

These and other examples begin to illustrate the power that can be harnessed when young people are mobilized and equipped to be change agents and contributors to community life. As many of the examples highlight, young people cannot transform a community without adults in partnership with them. But youth involvement can give new authenticity, energy, hope, and enthusiasm to a community’s asset-building efforts.

