

# Promoting Positive Development in Early Childhood

# The Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society

Series Editor

**Peter L. Benson**, Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Series Mission

To advance interdisciplinary inquiry into the individual, system, community, and societal dynamics that promote developmental strengths; and the processes for mobilizing these dynamics on behalf of children and adolescents.

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## PROMOTING POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Building Blocks for a Successful Start

Karen VanderVen

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Karen VanderVen

# Promoting Positive Development in Early Childhood

Building Blocks  
for a Successful Start

Karen VanderVen  
University of Pittsburgh  
Pittsburgh, PA 15260  
USA  
kvander@pitt.edu

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# Series Preface

This new volume in the Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society represents a milestone in Search Institute's signature work on the Developmental Assets that children and adolescents need in their lives to succeed. Through the research behind this book, Karen VanderVen links this strength-based, community-based approach to human development to early childhood development and practice. In doing so, she advances a long-term vision of understanding child and adolescent development not merely as a series of discrete stages, but as a trajectory of development in which experiences in each phase of development link to, reinforce, or redirect experiences in other aspects of life.

To be sure, VanderVen explores with both breadth and depth a particularly critical time in child development: the early childhood years, ages 3–5. The latest research in numerous fields has only increased our understanding of how important it is for communities to attend to children's developmental experiences in these crucial years. Positive development in early childhood leads young people on a path to a healthy adulthood; and a lack of positive development in early childhood has a blunting effect that extends into elementary and secondary schooling years.

The true measure of our society's attentiveness to young children, however, is not increased awareness; instead, it is, as VanderVen states in her introduction, "how well we actually *do* something to ensure that young children develop in positive ways." Yet many children's developmental needs are not being met, despite the burgeoning research on appropriate interventions.

One of the basic premises of Search Institute's work in Developmental Assets is that all members of a community can play an important role in meeting young children's developmental needs in whatever sectors they work and live. To address the gap between knowledge of positive early childhood development and the daily practice of those in all sectors of society charged with meeting the needs of children ages 3–5, VanderVen provides a new framework of Developmental Assets for this age group, guidelines informed by current, credible research, and practical suggestions for application in practice in schools, child-care centers, and family homes. *Building Blocks for a Successful Start* presents the framework and its theoretical, research, and practice underpinnings, then describes how the framework can help all those who work with young children better build their Developmental Assets in real life.

As editor of this series, I welcome this significant contribution to the literature on early childhood and positive development, and join my wishes with

those of the author, that this comprehensive, direct, and practical resource “can be a strong force in creating a holistic, systemic, more effective network of supportive child development efforts.” May it help us all in ensuring that all our children develop the strengths and skills that enable one to grow and even thrive throughout the unpredictabilities of life.

*Peter L. Benson, Ph.D.*  
*Search Institute*  
*Series Editor*

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*June 2008*

*Karen VanderVen,  
Pittsburgh, PA*



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# About the Author

Dr. Karen VanderVen is a Professor of Psychology in Education in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh where she has served as a Coordinator of the M.S. program in Applied Developmental Psychology. She has worked directly with both normal and exceptional children, and families, in a variety of settings including early childhood programs. Her interests include early childhood care and education, play and curriculum for young children, professionalization of direct work with young children, youth and families; leadership, and life course development.

Dr. VanderVen developed the Early Childhood Developmental Asset Framework (ECDAF) as Senior Visiting Fellow at Search Institute. In addition, she has been a Visiting Scholar at the Harvard Graduate School of Education focusing on child and youth development. She is on the Editorial Board of 8 professional journals and is the author of over 300 publications. Dr. VanderVen has lectured worldwide and has presented frequently at the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Annual Conference and Expo and Institute for Professional Development. She has served as a consultant to numerous early childhood programs such as Head Start and is a certified early childhood trainer for the Pennsylvania Quality Assurance System.

# Introduction: Early Childhood Today and the Developmental Assets Framework

In recent years [the] message—that early education isn’t something that should be left entirely to families; that the government has the obligation to improve the lives of young children—has started to resonate with parents, voters, and taxpayers ... [F]irst experiences ... become building blocks for what happens next in children’s lives.

—David L. Kirp, *The Nation* (November 21, 2005)

We read statements such as the preceding one from David Kirp every day. Indeed, the significance of positive development during the early childhood years for later school achievement, for successful interpersonal relationships, and for positive adult citizenship is underscored and more irrefutable than ever. Voices from the federal to local governmental levels, from policy makers to direct service providers, all recognize this importance and look, not always successfully, for ways to provide young children and their families with what they need during these crucial years. We want to prevent “blunting,” an effect on young children whose early experiences are not growth promoting and hence leaves them lacking the resources necessary to take optimal advantage of later experiences (Bloom & Wachs, 2005).

The real problem is not our awareness of the importance of early childhood development. Rather, it is how well we actually *do* something to ensure that young children develop in positive ways. Although we *know* about the importance of sound development for young children, and about the early childhood years as the time to begin laying the groundwork for healthy adulthood, there is a huge discrepancy between our burgeoning knowledge base, well stored away in journal articles and professional books, and what is being done with and for children in daily life, as embodied in comments such as the following from Head Start experts: “A lot is known about intervention, but some of this knowledge has been slow to work into daily practice” (Zigler & Styfco, 2004, p. xix).

Despite the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107–110), millions of children *are* not only left behind but also left out. They are not prepared to undertake the demands of school, nor do they have the emotional and social skills that contribute to harmonious relationships and to inclusion in an ever widening array of activities. Many families in our communities do not have adequate resources to ensure for themselves and their children the conditions that contribute to positive growth. They must rely on makeshift alternative

care arrangements that compromise their children's sense of security that is so related to positive development.

Although more and more young children are in out-of-home care facilities, the ability of those programs to properly meet children's developmental needs continues to be questionable. Child-care centers and preschools, especially in low-income areas, frequently lack the resources, both human and financial, for providing the kinds of experiences that promote cognitive, physical, social, and emotional competence.

Communities may offer little direct and systemic support for young children and their families, perhaps because young children tend to be less visible and overtly attention seeking than school-age children and adolescents. With rapid changes in society, there are emerging areas of development and conditions for successful participation, even for our youngest members, requiring that communities be more directly responsive to their presence.

Fortunately, many people from all walks of life are concerned about this situation and are becoming energized to address it—to *do* something. But basic questions persist: What specifically needs to be done? How can we do it? Where do we start?

It therefore would seem as if some guidelines for providing at least a general sense of focus for everybody concerned with and involved with young children would be useful if those guidelines were informed by current, credible research that both justifies them and gives practical suggestions concerning their application.

## The Early Childhood Developmental Assets Framework

The early childhood Developmental Assets framework, reflecting Search Institute's asset-focused, strengths-focused approach to child development, offers a research-based, comprehensive, practical resource. The framework consists of 40 specific assets—building blocks of healthy development—organized in two major categories, *external* and *internal*. Within each category are four subcategories, and within each of the subcategories, there are clusters of assets—central activities or indicators—that support the intent of the category. (See Display 1.)

External assets are environmental actions or factors that provide young people with an array of ingredients that encourage their positive growth. These developmentally supportive qualities are offered by parents, caregivers, teachers, neighbors, and a wide variety of people who are part of young children's extended community. *Support* assets address the ways in which children are cared for, nurtured, affirmed, and invested in by their families and other adults in the extended family and community. Needless to say, support is perhaps the most crucial of all of the external asset categories for young children. *Empowerment* assets are opportunities children of *all* ages need to feel valued and to make meaningful contributions to others at their own level. *Boundaries-and-expectations* assets describe the interpersonal context

and structure for encouraging appropriate and successful behavior in various settings. *Constructive-use-of-time* assets refer to involvement in meaningful, developmentally oriented activities that encourage learning and provide a basis for acquiring the social and emotional skills that are so important for later school success.

*Internal assets* are psychological and developmental capacities and perspectives that take shape in young children over time with the assistance of the adults, peers, neighborhoods, and communities that make up children's world. As with the external assets, there are four categories of internal assets. *Commitment-to-learning* assets refer to curiosity and investment in one's own education. *Positive-values* assets govern children's values-based choices with a focus on prosocial and widely shared societal values. *Social-competencies* assets are those interpersonal skills children need to develop positive relationships and are crucial to setting the pathway for positive adult living. *Positive-identity* assets pertain to children's emerging sense of who they are and their place in their world.

Interventions that can address the complex factors that shape development may have an effect by encouraging change and connection with other causative factors. The Early Childhood Developmental Assets framework can help establish mutual goals and focus all constituents toward their attainment, harmonize and coordinate disparate activities, and thus influence those multiple conditions that are related to positive child development. Building on people's interests, commitment, and energy, the framework can be widely applied. All members of a community can play an important role, whether bringing up, working with, working on behalf of, or having incidental contact with young children; whether in direct-care settings, in neighborhoods, or communities. In broader contexts, at the systems level, legislative bodies and local, state, and federal departments can be supported in focusing on the well-being of young children.

The purpose of *Building Blocks for a Successful Start: A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding and Promoting Early Childhood Development* is to present the early childhood Developmental Assets framework; explicate its theoretical, research, and practice underpinnings; describe how the framework can address a multitude of developmental needs of young children; and show how everybody can be an asset builder.

## Special Features of the Early Childhood Developmental Assets Framework

More detailed information concerning the framework's content or scope of coverage, as well as its utility and applicability, follows.

### Content Features

- *Respects and is predicated upon the significance of early experience for setting positive pathways for later development.* This is perhaps the fundamental

contribution of the early childhood Developmental Assets framework. The absolutely essential role that early experience, and the quality of that experience, plays in setting a course toward a productive and happy adulthood is compellingly established.

- *Represents breadth of research and practice support.* Too often, “rules of thumb” or everyday practices for dealing with children are based on “common sense” and one’s own experience as a child: “That’s the way I was brought up, and it should be quite good enough for the children I’m working with” (see, e.g., Chesebrough, King, Gullotta, & Bloom, 2004, p. vi).

Such practices are much less likely to result in healthy children than are those that are based on the most extensively accepted theoretical rationales, empirical developmental research, and on evidence-based practices.

Although the literature on early childhood development and early childhood education is voluminous (a comprehensive review of it has been made in the preparation of the early childhood Developmental Assets framework), the asset framework synthesizes it into guidelines that can readily be applied in the real lives of young children and their families.

- *Emphasizes thriving, strengths, and resilience.* The early childhood Developmental Assets framework reflects the tremendous recent transformation in the field of psychology from focusing on pathology to emphasizing strengths. The framework supports strivings toward positive growth of young children and enables everybody concerned with young children to recognize and build upon strengths in children and families. The original Developmental Assets framework similarly grew out of the recognition of approaches that emphasized positive aspects of development rather than exclusively focusing on problems.

Furthermore, the Developmental Assets framework promotes the qualities that make young children resilient, even when they encounter situations that put them developmentally at risk.

- *Focuses on relationships.* The framework represents the crucial role of relationships in promoting positive development, but goes even further by showing the role of *intentional* relationships between adults and children, as well as among peers.
- *Recognizes the importance of activities.* Activities such as play and appropriate physical, cultural, spiritual, and community activities are often underemphasized and supported as major contributors to developmental progress. The Developmental Assets framework shows what, why, and how activities must be included as essential developmental ingredients.

- *Addresses the ecology and systems that affect the child.* Asset building is considered to be a continuous process from earliest childhood on as a result of transactional interaction between both “nature” (genetic inheritance and constitutional, “present at birth” characteristics) and “nurture” (the environment). The environment is complex and includes not only all of the people who directly interact with young children but also those settings, societal institutions, and values that exert a strong influence on the nature of children’s experience. In other words, multiple experiences across a variety of settings play crucial roles in promoting thriving, strengths, and resiliency. Approaches to development must address all of these settings in which development is situated and influenced.

The Early Childhood Developmental Assets framework offers a set of ideas and practices around which settings such as *neighborhoods* and *communities* can organize to address all of the factors along with direct interaction with significant adults that influence the well-being of young children and their families: health care, housing, employment, transportation, safety.

- *Connects age ranges with a practical, unified approach.* The early childhood framework, while adapted specifically to the characteristics of young children, connects with the Developmental Assets frameworks for middle childhood (grades 4–6) and adolescence. Since other approaches focus on specific age ranges, the early childhood framework provides the first practical approach to serving young people that connects age ranges and hence resonates with the reality of developmental progression along thematic pathways from early childhood through adolescence. Furthermore, by providing a coherent model for cross-age-group intervention, the early childhood framework meets the research-supported premise that the longer an intervention is continued, the more likely initial effects are to be sustained.
- *Promotes smooth transitions.* The asset framework encourages the development of all the skills established by research as needed by young children to successfully make perhaps the most important transition in their life: to enter primary school with all of the attributes necessary to learn. These capabilities are holistic and include not only cognitive skills but also physical, social, and emotional qualities associated with positive school achievement.
- *Allows interconnectedness.* There is an interconnectedness among the assets: between the external and internal assets; among the asset categories; and among the assets within categories. This inter-relatedness leads to synergistic effects: The presence of a particular asset encourages the presence of other assets. Thus, an effort to develop even one asset may lead to positive effects in the domains of other assets.

## Utilization and Application Features

The Developmental Assets framework was constructed with a view toward ease of use and application, as evidenced by the following features:

- *Offers a clear, easy-to use format.* The Developmental Assets framework is clear and easy to understand. Any individual, group, or program can choose an asset or cluster of assets to start with and plan actions and activities needed to get the process under way. The descriptions in this book are intended to enable users to understand the nature of each asset and why it is important for development, as well as present some concrete ways to build each asset for and with young children.
- *Empowers everybody to be an asset builder and to be intentional in their actions with and on behalf of children.* The early childhood Developmental Assets framework can be used by anyone who comes into contact with or whose activities affect young children. Early childhood professionals will certainly find the Developmental Assets framework useful in all aspects of their work. But assets can also be promoted by everybody in young children's daily lives: extended family, neighbors, peers; community figures who work in such areas as leadership, legislation, transportation, food service, religion, law enforcement, maintenance; and many others. Indeed, the asset framework represents the adage "it takes a village to raise a child."

The framework, in its comprehensiveness and directness, encourages everybody to be aware that they have a role in promoting positive development in young children and offers encouragement and guidelines for specific, targeted involvement. This increased energizing can be a strong force in creating a holistic, systemic, more effective network of supportive child development efforts.

The asset framework relates to current approaches to providing quality in relationships, activities, and family support to young children, while offering, in addition, a comprehensive profile that focuses equally on all the systems that affect children's development: home, family, neighborhood, care or educational setting, and the wider community.

The Early Childhood Developmental Assets framework benchmarks well with accepted expositions of crucial aspects of positive child development, such as America's Promise ([www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org)), the widely quoted *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), and *The Irreducible Needs of Children* (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). The framework supports, extends, and offers concrete approaches to attaining the goals of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and of Head Start (e.g., Mehaffie & Fraser, 2007).

- *Extends a previously established effective approach.* The basic structure for the early childhood Developmental Assets framework was directly



derived from Search Institute's research-based and -tested Developmental Assets framework, which was developed more than 20 years ago to address the need for a strengths-based model for guiding youth development. This was a new approach in contrast to deficit- and problem-focused approaches, which had been relatively unsuccessful owing to their failure to take social context into account (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Research on the generic Developmental Assets framework (e.g., Scales & Leffert, 1999) has shown that possession of assets is related to positive developmental outcomes, and that the greater the number of assets reported, the greater the positive outcomes. (See the benchmark charts in Chapter 9.)

- *Developed in consultation with early childhood professionals.* Several years' work went into reviewing and summarizing the theory, research, and practice base of early childhood development, care, and education. This work was relied on to describe each asset category and all assets, as well as to provide their rationale and justification. Feedback was sought and taken into account throughout this process from individual and group meetings and presentations with recognized experts in early childhood care and education and child development, as well as Search Institute staff. (Additional information on the development of the early childhood Developmental Assets framework is in the appendix.)
- *Offers a detailed rationale and explanation of each asset.* Because of their clarity and brevity, the assets can have great heuristic, or practical, value. However, where there are guidelines or synthesized premises for a particular activity, it is always a challenge to ensure that they are properly understood with attention to their rationale, and a textured and detailed explanation of how they can be put into practice in different contexts to avoid the possibility of misapplication. The discussion of each asset offers a definition, a rationale derived from the most current professional literature on the subject, and some practical know-how for actually building the asset.
- *Can be used as targets for encouraging particular activities and as developmental indicators.* The early childhood framework offers a developmental map for organizing and reviewing deliberate efforts to promote positive development. It can also be used, however, as a way of determining and assessing both the quality of environments and the progress of children's development.

Parts I and II describe the 40 early childhood Developmental Assets, organized under the major categories of external and internal assets. A general descriptive introduction is given for each of the eight asset subcategories, focusing on its significance and major themes, which are then considered in more detail with the description of each specific asset: a rationale/explanation, showing the evidence supporting the asset, its significant in early childhood development, and the practices that promote the asset. Some assets are discussed in terms of how they relate to or support relevant guidelines or

early childhood program purposes such as Head Start. Similarly, there is cross-referencing to other assets that are supported by or are linked in some way to the asset under consideration.

There are three information sources for these evidence-oriented rationales: empirical evidence (e.g., results of research studies); theoretical explanations and concepts; and synthesized perspectives in which scholars and established authorities have reviewed evidence and used it to present their own reasoned viewpoints. This approach seems to best reflect the nature of the knowledge base of early childhood development and applied practice. For example, early childhood approaches such as developmentally appropriate practice tend to be theory based. Developmentally appropriate practice states that it draws heavily on such theorists as Erik Erikson, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

This is somewhat in contrast to Search Institute's approach to Developmental Assets for older children. *Coming into Their Own: How Developmental Assets Promote Positive Growth in Middle Childhood* (Scales, Sesma, & Bolstrom, 2004) almost solely uses empirical studies, rather than theories, to explain the assets for that age range. In general, however, the practice literature for school-age children is not as substantial as that for early childhood care and education (which is voluminous); much of this early childhood literature is based on an eclectic combination of theories, empirical studies, and practice-based observation and experience. In line with this precedent, and reflecting available information, *Building Blocks for a Successful Start* follows the same approach.

## Display 1

### The Early Childhood Developmental Assets Framework

#### EXTERNAL ASSETS

#### Support

1. *Family Support*—Parent(s) and/or primary caregiver(s) provide the child with high levels of consistent and predictable love, physical care, and positive attention in ways that are responsive to the child's individuality.
2. *Positive Family Communication*—Parent(s) and/or primary caregiver(s) express themselves positively and respectfully, engaging young children in conversations that invite their input.
3. *Other Adult Relationships*—With the family's support, the child experiences consistent, caring relationships with adults outside the family.
4. *Caring Neighbors*—The child's network of relationships includes neighbors who provide emotional support and a feeling of belonging.
5. *Caring Climate in Child-Care and Educational Settings*—Caregivers and teachers create environments that are nurturing, accepting, encouraging, and secure.

6. *Parent Involvement in Child Care and Education*—Parent(s), caregivers, and teachers together create a consistent and supportive approach to fostering the child’s successful growth.

#### Empowerment

7. *The Community Cherishes and Values Young Children*—Children are welcomed and included throughout community life.
8. *Children Seen as Resources*—The community demonstrates that children are valuable resources by investing in a child-rearing system of family support and high-quality activities and resources to meet children’s physical, social, and emotional needs.
9. *Service to Others*—The child has opportunities to perform simple but meaningful and caring actions for others.
10. *Safety*—Parent(s), caregivers, teachers, neighbors, and the community take action to ensure children’s health and safety.

#### Boundaries and Expectations

11. *Family Boundaries*—The family provides consistent supervision for the child and maintains reasonable guidelines for behavior that the child can understand and achieve.
12. *Boundaries in Child-Care and Educational Settings*—Caregivers and educators use positive approaches to discipline and natural consequences to encourage self-regulation and acceptable behaviors.
13. *Neighborhood Boundaries*—Neighbors encourage the child in positive, acceptable behavior, as well as intervene in negative behavior, in a supportive, nonthreatening way.
14. *Adult Role Models*—Parent(s), caregivers, and other adults model self-control, social skills, engagement in learning, and healthy lifestyles.
15. *Positive Peer Relationships*—Parent(s) and caregivers seek to provide opportunities for the child to interact positively with other children.
16. *Positive Expectations*—Parent(s), caregivers, and teachers encourage and support the child in behaving appropriately, undertaking challenging tasks, and performing activities to the best of her or his abilities.

#### Constructive Use of Time

17. *Play and Creative Activities*—The child has daily opportunities to play in ways that allow self-expression, physical activity, and interaction with others.
18. *Out-of-Home and Community Programs*—The child experiences well-designed programs led by competent, caring adults in well-maintained settings.
19. *Religious Community*—The child participates in age-appropriate religious activities and caring relationships that nurture her or his spiritual development.

20. *Time at Home*—The child spends most of her or his time at home participating in family activities and playing constructively, with parent(s) guiding TV and electronic game use.

## INTERNAL ASSETS

### Commitment to Learning

21. *Motivation to Mastery*—The child responds to new experiences with curiosity and energy, resulting in the pleasure of mastering new learning and skills.
22. *Engagement in Learning Experiences*—The child fully participates in a variety of activities that offer opportunities for learning.
23. *Home-Program Connection*—The child experiences security, consistency, and connections between home and out-of-home care programs and learning activities.
24. *Bonding to Programs*—The child forms meaningful connections with out-of-home care and educational programs.
25. *Early Literacy*—The child enjoys a variety of pre-reading activities, including adults reading to her or him daily, looking at and handling books, playing with a variety of media, and showing interest in pictures, letters, and numbers.

### Positive Values

26. *Caring*—The child begins to show empathy, understanding, and awareness of others' feelings.
27. *Equality and Social Justice*—The child begins to show concern for people who are excluded from play and other activities or not treated fairly because they are different.
28. *Integrity*—The child begins to express her or his views appropriately and to stand up for a growing sense of what is fair and right.
29. *Honesty*—The child begins to understand the difference between truth and lies, and is truthful to the extent of her or his understanding.
30. *Responsibility*—The child begins to follow through on simple tasks to take care of her- or himself and to help others.
31. *Self-Regulation*—The child increasingly can identify, regulate, and control her or his behaviors in healthy ways, using adult support constructively in particularly stressful situations.

### Social Competencies

32. *Planning and Decision Making*—The child begins to plan for the immediate future, choosing from among several options and trying to solve problems.
33. *Interpersonal Skills*—The child cooperates, shares, plays harmoniously, and comforts others in distress.

34. *Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity*—The child begins to learn about her or his own cultural identity and to show acceptance of people who are racially, physically, culturally, or ethnically different from her or him.
35. *Resistance Skills*—The child begins to sense danger accurately, to seek help from trusted adults, and to resist pressure from peers to participate in unacceptable or risky behavior.
36. *Peaceful Conflict Resolution*—The child begins to compromise and resolve conflicts without using physical aggression or hurtful language.

#### Positive Identity

37. *Personal Power*—The child can make choices that give a sense of having some influence over things that happen in her or his life.
38. *Self-Esteem*—The child likes her- or himself and has a growing sense of being valued by others.
39. *Sense of Purpose*—The child anticipates new opportunities, experiences, and milestones in growing up.
40. *Positive View of Personal Future*—The child finds the world interesting and enjoyable, and feels that he or she has a positive place in it.

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