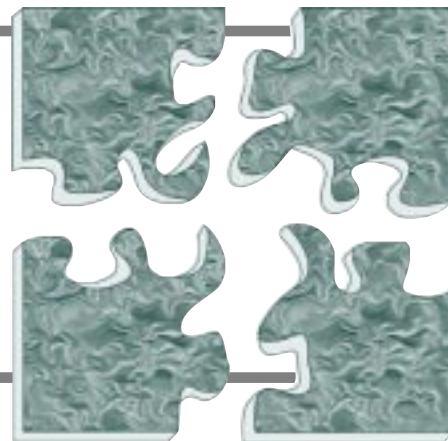# BEST
PRACTICE
BRIEFS

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

IN ALL HUMAN SERVICES,

- focus on assets rather than deficits.

IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT,

- involve all facets of the community in planning
- recognize practices, not programs, are key
- promote individual actions to value youth and reinforce pro-social behavior
- attend to systems change, e.g. improving school climate, assuring opportunities for building connections and skills
- build in redundancy— multiple efforts make a difference
- link at-risk youth to opportunities to build assets

OUTREACH PARTNERSHIPS

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

THE ASSETS / STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH TO PROGRAMMING:

PROMOTING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Moving from a problem/deficit orientation to an assets/strength-based orientation is a major paradigm shift occurring in many human service domains. For citizens, agencies, and communities concerned about adolescent behaviors and poor outcomes, building assets is a viable way to promote positive youth development. This BEST PRACTICE BRIEF *covers developing aspects of the assets/strength-based approach, general findings from Search Institute surveys, and some avenues for action.*

WHAT IS THIS PARADIGM SHIFT?

CONCEPTS

Characteristically, human service agencies focus on individual, family, neighborhood, and community needs/deficits/problems. This negative emphasis communicates a sense of failure and helplessness, reinforces low expectations, creates dependency on outside resources and agency-created solutions, and discourages individuals and communities from moving in the direction of positive outcomes. (This may be one explanation for intervention failures in evaluated projects where the control subjects do as well as, or better than, those receiving the intervention.)

Conversely, a positive emphasis on resilience and protective factors/assets/strengths

- ❖ communicates a sense of hope
- ❖ establishes expectations for success within an individual's capacities
- ❖ promotes empowerment and independence
- ❖ sets in motion forces for improvement

CONCEPTS

TOOLS

PROCESSES

MODELS

HOW IS THE ASSETS/ STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH BEING APPLIED?

PROCESSES

The assets/strength-based approach changes the way agencies think about programming to improve outcomes for children and families. It changes the way communities go about efforts to "solve" youth and neighborhood problems. Outlined below are current efforts that use the assets/strength-based approach.

To Promote Volunteerism on Behalf of Children

America's Promise, an initiative sponsored by President Clinton and chaired by General Colin Powell, is an effort to mobilize communities to achieve five promises (or assets) for children:

❖ relationships with caring adults

❖ safe places and structured activities

❖ a healthy start for a healthy future

❖ marketable skills through effective education

❖ opportunities to serve

For more information, see: http://www.americas promise.org

To Develop Communities

John Kretchmann and John McKnight propose that deteriorating communities avoid the needs/deficits/ problems approach that relies on help from the outside and instead identify and use the assets they have available. They define community assets as:

❖ the skills of individuals that can be mobilized to help others or to become income-producing

❖ the resources (meeting space, equipment, manpower) and opportunities that community associations, businesses, and institutions can make available

These assets would then be used to build connections — between adults and youth, between organizations and individuals, and between organizations.

For more information, see: KRETZMANN, JOHN P. AND MCKNIGHT JOHN L. (1993). *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets.* Chicago: ACTA Publications. 4848 North Clark Street, Chicago, IL 60640; tel: 800-397-2282.

To Mobilize Communities for Youth Development

Advocates and organizations (e.g. Academy for Educational Development and Search Institute) are actively promoting the assets/strength-based approach to mobilize communities for youth development. Search Institute[1], for example, undertakes surveys of middle and high school students across the country, documenting that the more assets an adolescent has, the less likely he or she is to engage in risky behavior, and the more likely to show evidence of thriving. ***Thus, building assets can protect youth from such health compromising behaviors as teen violence, teen pregnancy, alcohol use, and illicit drug use.***

Some 460 communities across the country have invested in Search surveys of their adolescent population as a way of energizing their communities to shift from programming on the basis of deficits/ problems to promoting assets/strengths for youth development. The results of these surveys and a plan for community action are discussed later in this B R I E F.

For more information, see: BENSON, PETER L. (1997). *All Kids Are Our Kids.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

SEARCH INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS, 700 S. Third St., Suite 210, Minneapolis, MN 55415.

KEITH, JOANNE AND PERKINS, DANIEL. (1996). *13,000 Adolescents: A Profile of Michigan Youth.* East Lansing: Michigan State University, Institute for Children, Youth and Families.

CENTER CONNECTIONS, A Newsletter of the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, Academy for Educational Development. 1875 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20009, tel: 202-884-8273.

> BUILDING ASSETS
> High-risk youth were resistant to XYZ school's efforts to teach them responsibility until "responsibility" was made a school-wide theme for all students with posters, incorporation into curriculum, and teachers acknowledging responsible behavior with praise.

To Improve Schools

Using the literature on youth development and resiliency, Nan Henderson and Mike Milstein have operationalized the assets approach for schools. They show in detail how this approach can be used to build resiliency for students, for the staff, and for the administration.

For more information, see: HENDERSON, NAN AND MILSTEIN, MIKE M. (1996). *Resiliency in Schools: Making It Happen for Students and Educators.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

MODELS

To Serve Children and Families with Problems

The mental health, social service, and juvenile court systems in Michigan, Ohio, Alaska, and other states are promoting the use of strength-based services to reduce costs of out-of-home care for children who have experienced or are at risk of placement in foster care or institutions. In this "wraparound"[2] service model, the family is in control of service planning; the process identifies the strengths of each family member, reframes problems or deficits, and considers what might improve the situation for the child and family in the various life domains. Informal community resources rather than formal services are used to carry out the service plan. This structured focus on the positive has saved agencies those resources that would have been spent on more expensive traditional treatments. Although this "wraparound" approach uses an interagency team, any community professional working with children can apply the key aspects of the "wraparound" philosophy.

Example: Operating on the premise of unconditional care ("never give up"), family and service staff develop a family plan of service that may provide a companion to enable the child to attend school without disrupting the classroom, pay for lessons or activities that interest the child, and encourage involvement of extended family and neighbors.

BUILDING ASSETS

In providing a work study opportunity for Roger, Mr. Smith also acts as a supportive adult and mentor. Thanks to his encouragement and counsel, Roger learns new skills and decides to stay in school.
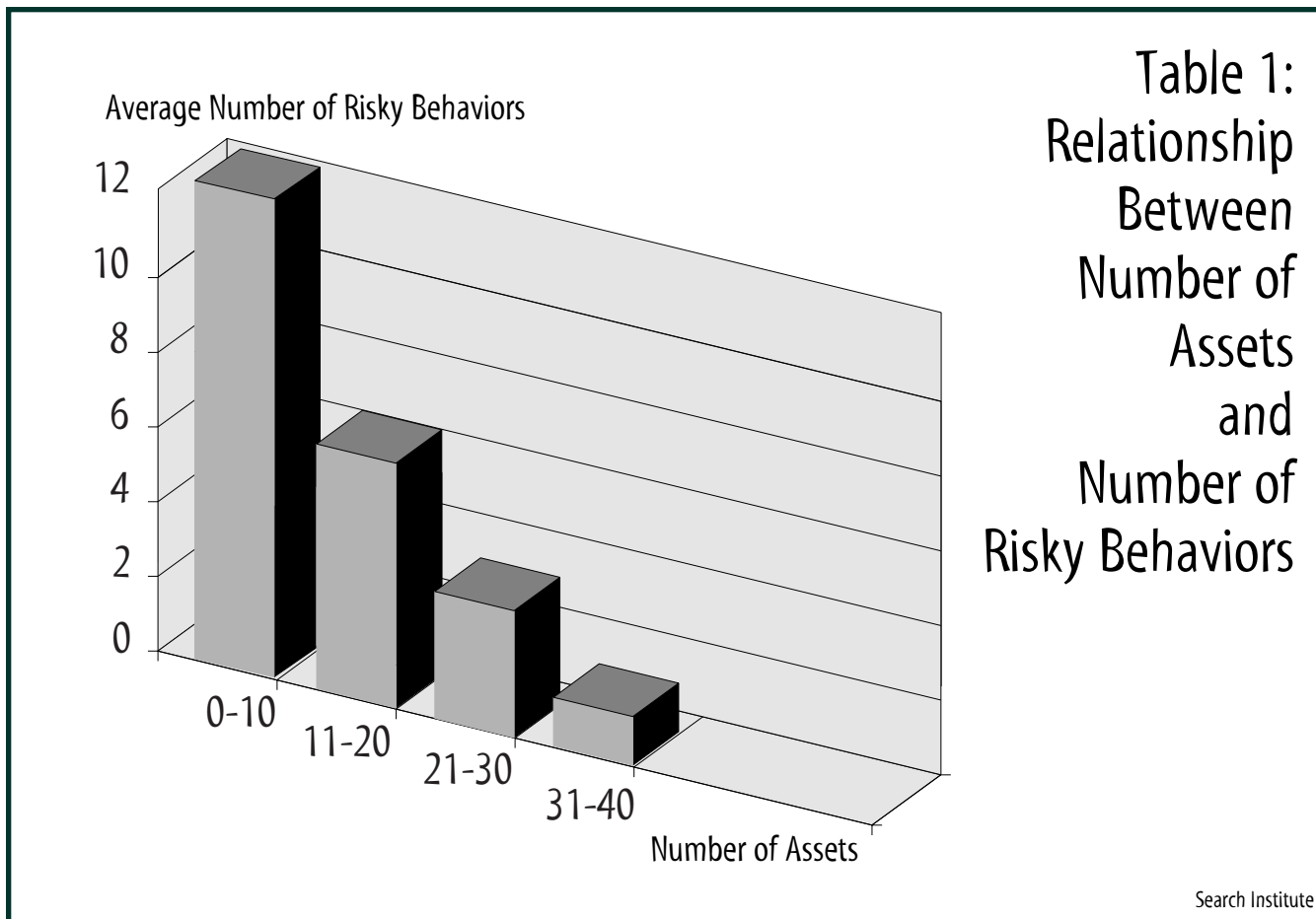

THE VOCABULARY

The following distinctive terms come from the work of researchers and practitioners. In practice, they tend to be used interchangeably:

❍ **Resilience:** the capacity to overcome biological risk factors or stressful life events. Behavioral scientists studying the life course of children exposed to biological risk factors and/or adverse life circumstances—e.g. parents with mental illness, economic hardship, physical vulnerabilities or abuse, divorce, high crime neighborhoods—found that as many as half of these high-risk children grew up to have good outcomes. They labeled these children "resilient."

❍ **Protective Factors:** used by resilience researchers to mean innate characteristics of the individuals and aspects of the environment that modify, ameliorate, or buffer a person's reaction to a risk factor and thus result in resilience. Protective Factors may be a child's characteristics that attract adults (e.g. physical features, intelligence, health, easy temperament) or such aspects of the environment as caring relationship with an adult, absence of traumatic stressors, economic well-being, or social competencies.

❍ **Assets:** used by persons concerned with *youth development* to mean Protective Factors. *Developmental Assets* is the term used by Search Institute for the building blocks needed for children to grow up healthy, competent, and caring, i.e. the strengths and capacities of individuals and the caring, support, and opportunities in the environment surrounding them.

❍ **Assets:** used by persons in *community development* to mean skills, capacities, and resources.

❍ **Strength-based:** a focus on positive aspects in working with dysfunctional individuals and families, used by therapists developing family-centered services and alternative treatment approaches.

All these researchers and practitioners take an ecological approach. The child is seen as developing within the nexus of emotional support, consistent values, and learning opportunities provided by the family and the community.

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[2] "Wraparound" in early childhood and educational circles is used to mean full day programming.

Average Number of Risky Behaviors

Table 1: Relationship Between Number of Assets and Number of Risky Behaviors

Number of Assets

Search Institute

MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: THE SEARCH INSTITUTE SURVEYS

The Search Institute calls adolescence "the troubled journey." Its surveys of more than 250,000 adolescents in grades 7 through 12 document:

❖ the extent to which these adolescents report 40 assets and 24 risky behaviors

❖ the relationship between the number of assets and the number of risky behaviors

❖ the relationship between the number of assets and thriving indicators

❖ the relationship between the number of assets and deficits

The reports indicate that developmental assets are cumulative or additive in their impact. The fact that Search Institute survey information indicates a consistent overall pattern of findings in community after community[3] is a powerful motivator for action to build assets for youth. Across communities, survey reports show that:

❖ **More assets = fewer risky behaviors. Fewer assets = more risky behaviors.**
There is a striking drop in risky behavior evidenced by those youth who have 21 or more assets. Yet adolescents in 460 communities have an average of 15 to 18 out of 30 developmental assets.

❖ **More assets = more thriving indicators.**

❖ **Assets mediate the impact of deficits.** Adolescents who experience deficits but do not evidence risky behavior have a higher number of assets.

❖ **Boys have fewer assets** than girls have. Boys engage in more risky behaviors.

❖ Risky behaviors are present in **clusters.**

❖ **Violent behaviors** decrease from grade 7 through grade 12, but involvement with alcoholism, drugs, and sex increase.

4

Across communities, particular assets are reported in a consistent pattern:

❖ A higher proportion (half or more) of adolescents report family support, motivation to achieve, values of responsibility, integrity, honesty, sense of purpose, positive view of future, actively engaged in learning.

❖ A middle proportion report support from non-family adult relationships, service to others, feeling safe, concern about equality, social justice, sense of control, self-esteem.

❖ A lower proportion (35% or less) report community values youth, youth are given useful roles, caring school climate, positive adult role models, read for pleasure three hours per week, creative activities.

[3] Information on consistencies and variations is based on national, state of Michigan, East Lansing and Charlotte, Michigan data.

SEARCH INSTITUTE'S LISTS

40 DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS

20 External Assets

☆ family, school, community **boundaries** for behavior, role models, **and expectations** (6 items)

☆ constructive **use of time** in creative, recreational and religious activities (4 items)

☆ **support** from family, school, and other adults (6 items)

☆ **empowerment** through community valuing youth, opportunities for service, safety (4 items)

20 Internal Assets

☆ **educational commitment** related to achievement motivation, school performance, hours of homework, bonding to school, reading for pleasure (5 items)

☆ **positive values** related to integrity, honesty, responsibility, behavioral restraint, pro-social behavior (6 items)

☆ **social competencies** related to planning and decision-making, interpersonal competencies, resistance skills, conflict resolution, cultural competence (5 items)

☆ **positive identity** related to self-esteem, sense of purpose, positive view of future, control over events (4 items)

24 RISK-TAKING BEHAVIORS

☾ use of alcohol (2 items)

☾ use of tobacco (2 items)

☾ use of illicit drugs (3 items)

☾ drinking and driving (2 items)

☾ sexual intercourse

☾ anti-social behavior (3 items)

☾ violence (6 items)

☾ gambling

☾ skipping school

☾ depression

☾ attempted suicide

☾ eating disorders

8 THRIVING INDICATORS

☆ succeeds in school

☆ helps others

☆ values diversity

☆ maintains good health

☆ exhibits leadership

☆ resists danger

☆ delays gratification

☆ overcomes adversity

5 DEFICITS

☾ alone at home

☾ overexposure to TV

☾ physical abuse in family

☾ victim of violence

☾ drinking parties

Across communities, there are also variations:

❖ The chief variation is in the **proportion of adolescents who are "high risk":** those youth with 0 to 10 assets range from 10% to 30% of adolescents. Across all communities, 76% of adolescents report 20 or fewer assets.

❖ Some communities show no substantial variation among grades; in others, adolescents in one or more grades show a lower average number of assets

❖ Whether the proportion of youth reporting the following assets is high, medium, or low varies among communities: participation in youth programs, service to others, clear family rules, out doing nothing special not more than two nights per week, religious activity weekly, bonded to school, caring behavior, control over life, self-esteem, resistance skills, friendship making skills, planning/decision making skills, peaceful conflict resolution, homework one hour a day, friends as good models, cultural competence, positive family communication, caring neighborhood, clear school rules, neighbors monitor, sex and alcohol restraint.
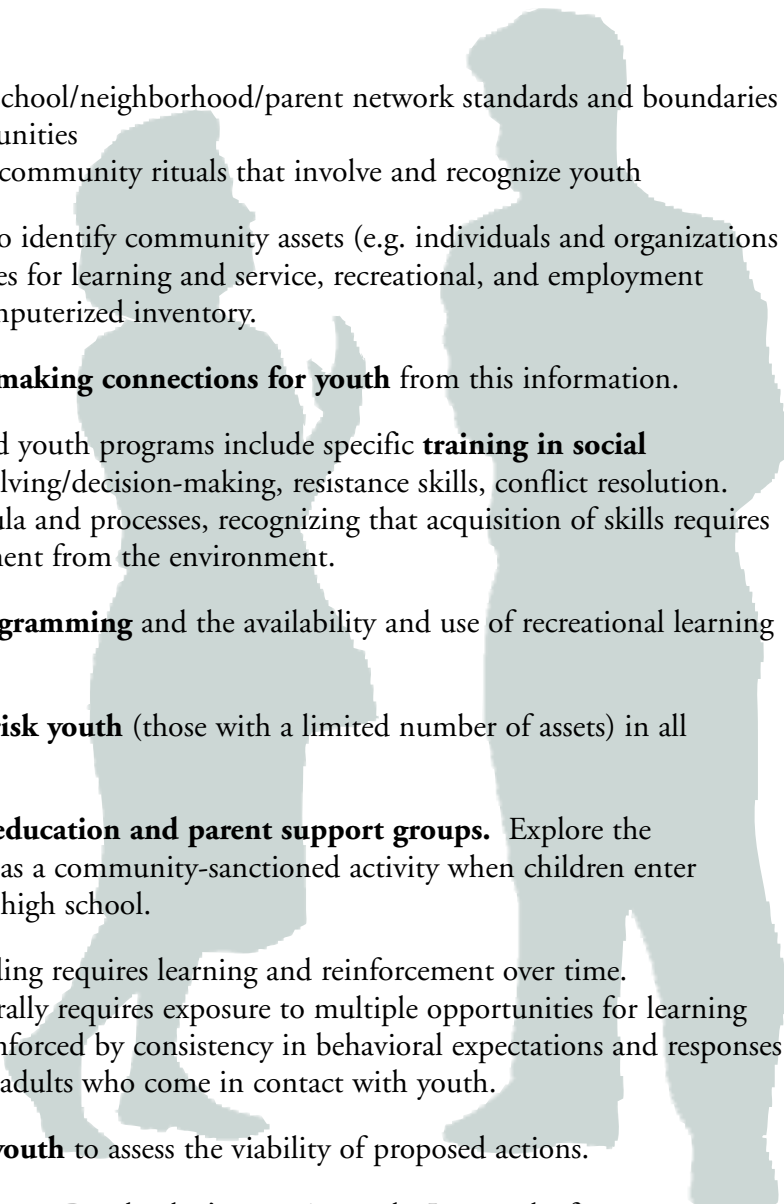
PROCESSES STEPS FOR COMMUNITY ACTION IN ASSET DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUTH

The message of *America's Promise* and of the Search Institute survey is the need to **strengthen and rebuild the developmental infrastructure for all youth, as the way to reduce the number of high-risk youth.**[4]

An effective action plan can include the following steps:

❖ Recognize that building developmental assets requires a shift in the environment experienced by youth, through **changing individual and community practices.**
   ◆ The key is to change practices so that all youth experience a caring and supportive relationship.
   ◆ Parents, school and community are consistent in communicating boundaries and high expectations.
   ◆ All youth have opportunities to participate in activities that result in the acquisition of values, skills, and social competencies.

❖ Organize a **steering committee** in the framework of a community coalition or a multi-purpose collaborative body. **Include youth** on the steering committee.
   ◆ Review the general or specific Search Institute findings in the context of what is known about the community.   Review the Search Institute chart, *Characteristics of Asset-Building Communities.* Explore how each asset could be promoted in your community.
   ◆ Review Kretchmann and McKnight's publication on *Building Communties from the Inside Out.* The insights in McKnight's Community Asset Mobilization can be used to operationalize the information gained from a Search Institute survey. The Community Asset Mobilization game plan involves a community organization to plan and implement the effort, a house-to-house inventorying of community assets, and an ongoing process to make connections between the asset holders and community residents.
   ◆ Organize and promote assets using the framework of America's Promise.

❖ **Develop a workplan** for what needs to be done to accomplish better outcomes for youth by promoting developmental assets, including
   ◆ Energizing the community around a community vision.
   ◆ Changing individual and organizational practices with respect to caring support, mentoring, monitoring, commending, acknowledging, and involving.
   ◆ Identifying individual and organizational assets, with arrangements for making connections with youth.
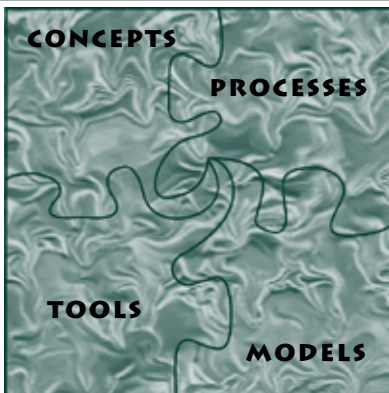   ◆ Developing programs.

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[4] Actions to control and remediate problems must continue, but the problem centered approach cannot change the underlying issues.

❖ **Make presentations and hold discussions.** Take the story to church, civic, neighborhood, and youth service groups; ask them to participate in decision making, implementing, promoting.
  ◆ Expand the steering committee to include all facets of the community.
  ◆ Organize study/action groups within schools, neighborhoods, churches, civic clubs, organizations such as the parent-teacher organization, community institutions (especially middle and high schools), and businesses to initiate changes in practices. Include youth on study/action groups.

❖ **Explore** such possibilities as:
  ◆ informal mentoring
  ◆ coming to agreement on school/neighborhood/parent network standards and boundaries
  ◆ developing service opportunities
  ◆ emphasizing cultural and community rituals that involve and recognize youth

❖ Consider **using teams of youth** to identify community assets (e.g. individuals and organizations that can provide opportunities for learning and service, recreational, and employment possibilities) and to develop a computerized inventory.

❖ Develop an ongoing **process for making connections for youth** from this information.

❖ Be sure that schools and organized youth programs include specific **training in social competencies** such as problem solving/decision-making, resistance skills, conflict resolution. Use validated best practice curricula and processes, recognizing that acquisition of skills requires learning over time and reinforcement from the environment.

❖ Pay attention to **after-school programming** and the availability and use of recreational learning opportunities for all youth.

❖ Develop strategies to **include at-risk youth** (those with a limited number of assets) in all opportunities.

❖ Review opportunities for **parent education and parent support groups.** Explore the development of parent education as a community-sanctioned activity when children enter kindergarten, middle school, and high school.

❖ **Build in redundancy.** Asset building requires learning and reinforcement over time. Developing skills and values generally requires exposure to multiple opportunities for learning and practice. Asset building is reinforced by consistency in behavioral expectations and responses from parents, teachers, and other adults who come in contact with youth.

❖ Consider using **focus groups of youth** to assess the viability of proposed actions.

Building assets for youth is a **long-term process.** Results don't come instantly. It can take five years or more to redirect community practices so that they provide for consistent support, caring, recognition, boundaries, and opportunities for building competencies through school activities, community activities, and service learning.

Search Institute focused on adolescents. But building assets for youth is not limited to adolescents. It **spans all ages.** It starts with community support for pregnant women and for parents of newborns and continues throughout childhood. Recognizing the status of youth assets in a community is just a beginning point on a long journey to redirect effort and resources.

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Werner, Emmy E. and Smith, Ruth S. (1992). *Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

BEST PRACTICE BRIEF No. 2 was written with assistance from Joanne G. Keith, Department of Family and Child Ecology.

BUILDING ASSETS
Parents in Evergreen Subdivision and their children have met several times to establish boundaries and expectations. They have reached agreement on alcohol and chaperones at parties, curfews, use of cars, and monitoring of inappropriate behavior.

BEST PRACTICE BRIEFS—FOR FUNDERS, POLICY MAKERS, PLANNERS, MANAGERS

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