“Assets are a survival guide to life.”
— Fifth grade student, Creekside Elementary School

These profound words, from an elementary school student who learned about developmental assets in class, clearly demonstrate that even young children can understand the essence of assets; that assets help them become better, stronger people, capable of making good choices and successfully handling the challenges they face in their daily lives.

Developmental assets are positive factors that promote healthy development in children and adolescents. They are one of many important tools that adults — including parents, teachers, coaches, neighbors, businesspeople and other community members — can use to provide the positive framework children and adolescents need to succeed.

Research conducted by the Search Institute shows that “asset-rich” children take fewer negative risks and are more likely to be successful academically, socially and emotionally than are children who lack those experiences and qualities. The data is clear that when students have more than 20 assets, risk-taking behaviors such as alcohol and other drug use, and sexual activity, are reduced by 50 percent. When students exceed 30 assets, risk-taking behavior is cut in half again, making it almost negligible.

Additional data from the Search Institute reveals how real the risks are. In a 2003 survey of 8th, 10th and 12th graders:

- Forty-one percent of students indicated that they had used alcohol once or more in the last 30 days.
- A quarter of students reported getting drunk within the last two weeks.
- Thirteen percent of students reported driving while drinking in the past 12 months.
- Thirty-four percent of students reported having sexual intercourse three or more times.

In addition, the amount of asset deficits that students report is also a concern:

- More than half of students reported being home alone more than two hours a day.
- Thirty percent of students reported watching three or more hours of television per day.

The survey also reveals some important paradoxes. For example, while 78 percent of students reported a positive view of their future, just 19 percent reported resisting danger. We must alter student attitudes about risk-taking to help them differentiate between positive and negative risk-taking. Too often, today’s society lives by Nietzsche’s view, “If it doesn’t kill you, it will make you stronger.” Far too many people seem to forget that taking negative risks may do just that — kill you.

It is imperative that we, as parents, as educators, as adults who care about kids, work together to build assets in all children. We must reach out to the greater community, help people understand the positive impact of assets and engage them as partners in our efforts to keep kids safe and help them become responsible, caring adults.

A good example is what has happened in the Willow Creek neighborhood in the Cherry Creek School District. There, you see “assets in action” every day. Parents, neighbors and other adults understand the importance of building assets in all children, and do so actively. They are intentional in their interactions with children, whether that interaction is as simple as addressing a child by name and saying “hello” while out for a walk, or enforcing the community’s common values and boundaries, while respecting each family’s individual values, beliefs and parenting style.

We must expand this kind of cooperative effort. If we don’t, popular society will dictate the attitudes and, ultimately, the behaviors of our youth. As President Theodore Roosevelt once said, “To educate a person in mind but not in morals is to educate a menace to society.”

I encourage you to learn more about developmental assets and their benefits and to put them to work in your family, your school and your community. Your actions as an “asset-builder” will be one of the most important and powerful things you can do for your kids, and for all our kids.
In Cherry Creek Schools...
The 40 Developmental Assets, researched and named by the Search Institute and adopted by the Cherry Creek School District, provide a positive approach to helping youth grow into responsible, confident and healthy young people who are able to realize their full individual and academic potential.

It is up to families to decide what Assets are the best match in regard to their culture and values. Research shows that there is a strong correlation between a student possessing a high number of Assets (30 or more) and exhibiting positive behavior.

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