

Mega E-Forum Newsletter March 2010

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Great Friend to Kids Award Recipient Peter Benson Talks Developmental Assets



At InterActivity 2010, ACM will award Search Institute its highest honor, the Great Friend to Kids Award. Accepting on behalf of the Institute is its president and CEO, Peter L. Benson, Ph.D. Dr. Benson's international reputation in human development emerged in the 1990s through his innovative, research-based framework of Developmental Assets, the most widely recognized approach to positive child and youth development in the United States and, increasingly, around the world. Now organized by age group (for children ages 0-18), the Developmental Assets influence state and national public policy in education, juvenile justice, public health and substance abuse prevention among other fields. We caught up with Dr. Benson to learn more about Search Institute, its programs and its research agenda.

ACM: For more than 50 years, Search Institute has been discovering what kids need to succeed. Tell us about the founding of Search Institute and how its mission has evolved over half a century.

Benson: Founded in the late 1950s, Search Institute began as a research and evaluation organization, with an emphasis on prevention and education. Its research and evaluation work came mainly from federal and state contracts to study youth. In 1978, I joined the Institute's staff as a research scientist to lead a study of beliefs and values of members of Congress. About this time, the Institute's founder Merton Strommen began thinking about succession planning.

In 1985, Strommen retired and as the new president I began putting a strategic plan into action to create a strong identity for Search Institute. At that time, the overall environment and approach to youth was to prevent negative outcomes. No one was really looking at developing a formula to raise successful and healthy young adults. We proposed a change to the basic vocabulary and thinking about youth; we proposed studying and promoting positive development. Over the next few years, Search Institute evolved from a research/think tank to what I'd like to term an "action tank." Search Institute mobilizes communities to care about kids, to go from a strength position, to take small steps that over time lead to remarkable growth. Positive development is not a big bang theory; it's a daily process and daily connection between caregiver and child. We also began to look more closely at the effects of a solid foundation for youth, and that led us to invest in research on the needs and opportunities for early childhood.

The Institute's newest venture in providing and promoting a science-based, innovative approach to child and youth development is the idea of thriving - with the lead metaphor of "spark." Adults have a role and responsibility to help children and youth find their own spark, the thing that they are good at, the contribution they can offer to make the world more beautiful. If young people discover their spark, they are on the path to thriving, to falling in love with their life and all of life.

What remains constant about Search Institute is that we seek to make change at the grassroots level. We are an activist organization but we do not seek to drive public policy. We believe in the power vested within communities, in parents, in schools and in local organizations with a high touch, such as children's museums.

ACM: The Institute defines Developmental Assets as concrete, positive experiences and qualities that are essential to raising successful young people. The Institute has identified 40 Developmental Assets and organized them into eight categories. From a messaging standpoint, how does this segmentation help inform and persuade your key audience about the importance of the assets?

Benson: Forty assets is a lot to remember; for some people it gets a little confusing. So, let's try thinking about eight categories. Even broader, let's think about two categories: external and internal Developmental Assets.

Some of the really critical assets for young people involve their ecology - the relationships and the way that families, neighborhoods and institutions connect. This ecology connects to Developmental Assets for support, empowerment and structure. Maybe half of the Development Assets are about the quality and strength of the people and institutions in the external world. The other half is the nurturing of the internal world. These things feed each other.

We use the eight categories to help people track what positive support actually looks like for children from infancy to teenagers. The eight categories give us an easier road map through development in the first 20 or so years of life and show how to support children regardless of their age. Those eight categories stay important for all those ages, and they give people easier "handles" for storing and recalling the 40 assets. They provide a framework and continuity across the first two decades of life.

ACM: The majority of Search Institute's research data is collected through surveys and focus groups. Can you tell us more about this methodology?

Benson: There are several advantages for conducting research using surveys. First of all, surveys are relatively inexpensive and are useful in describing the characteristics of a large population. If large samples are possible, the results are statistically significant even when analyzing multiple variables. There are downsides to surveys as well. Survey methodology forces the researcher to develop questions general enough to be minimally appropriate for all respondents. We try to correct for this by also doing focus groups to clarify responses.

The current Search Institute dataset that describes the state of Developmental Assets among U. S. adolescents comes from more than 148,000 6th- to 12th-graders in more than 200 communities across the United States. Surveys were conducted during 2003. This dataset was weighted to adjust for underrepresentation of groups of youth (minority and urban) by using the 2000 U. S. Census data for community size and for race/ethnicity. Weighting is an acceptable statistical procedure often used by researchers, which adjusts the values of responses for certain groups. Simply, this technique corrects for over- and underrepresentation of certain groups. Like the previous two datasets, this current dataset was drawn from individual communities that chose to survey their own students, and is consequently not nationally representative.

ACM: The Institute also runs the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence. How does the work of the Center fit with Search Institute's overall focus on bringing communities together for the benefit of children and youth?

Benson: At its heart, Search Institute is about providing scientific research that leads to improvement in the lives of children and adolescents. We view spiritual development as one vital part of overall child and youth development, and we also view faith-based organizations as one of the vital sectors of the community that can nurture spiritual development and also contribute strongly to overall child development.

Because of this view, we have a long tradition of scientific study and consulting on how denominations, churches, synagogues and mosques, for example, can strengthen their positive impact on young people. This stream of work has brought us into association with more than 45 religious bodies. Our most recent work in this arena focuses on the process and practice of congregational engagement in community initiatives that are designed to enhance the well-being of a community's youth. Too often, faith

communities either pull away or are pushed away from these initiatives. Our theory of community building positions the religious sector as a prime actor, along with schools, families, neighborhoods, businesses and local government, all playing a part in raising healthy young people. So we see this work as an important facet of our ongoing efforts to develop communities that are attentive to all aspects of young people's development.

ACM: You have written or edited more than a dozen books on child and adolescent development, including *Sparks: How Parents Can Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers*. One of the central themes in that book is that teens need their parents to be their cheerleaders. In contrast, the central theme in Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman's recent book, *NurtureShock*, is that many of modern society's strategies for nurturing children are backfiring. What is your reaction to and thoughts on the notion that too much praise is bad for children?

Benson: This is an important question. I think that we have a problem in America with helicopter parents, or parents who are making their kids be engaged in everything. There can be too much of a good thing. The idea in *Sparks* is actually a little bit different, requiring that a parent understand from a young person's point of view what gives the child joy, energy and is intrinsically motivating. It's the kid's view of his/her human spark. What is it about the way you are wired that is good, beautiful and useful to the world? Then, a spark champion - whether a parent, teacher or community member - helps to nurture that spark.

One of the spark champion's roles is to affirm that spark. Nurturing that spark is critical; it's going deep to the part of the child that is his/her anchor. It's not about the parent setting the agenda; it's the kid who sets the agenda and the parent who nurtures. It starts with the premise that the child tells the parent what that spark is. In America, less than half of the young people we surveyed have talked to a parent about their spark; only a third has talked with an adult at school. Yet we know this is an important subject that children are interested to explore. A caring adult only need to begin the discussion by asking: When do you have a sense of joy, a sense that time stands still?

Most of the research I've done on sparks and their power in the development of kids is on 11-18 year olds who are becoming self-aware enough and have had enough life experiences so that one or two things begin to emerge as organizing principles for their lives. The roots of spark many times are in childhood; adults and older kids often can trace that spark back to ages five, six, seven and eight. Children's museums and quality child-centered institutions that provide a smorgasbord of compelling life experiences influence a young person's ability to self-reflect: Where does my energy come? When do my eyes get big? That's why the richness of these kinds of formative experiences is so critical.

A good spark-generating parent is not a helicopter parent. You can't force a five year old to identify his/her spark. It's cool for young children to have five or six things that they think their spark is -- water, dinosaurs, things that move real fast. Hopefully an adult will introduce the language and concept of spark and empower a child to identify when he/she feels their energy rise to say, for example, "I think my spark is creating art out of found objects." Steven Spielberg knew at age six that he liked filming things.

ACM: Have you conducted any longitudinal studies following younger children through their adolescent years? If not, is this something that Search Institute might do in the future?

Benson: No, and we'd love to. We have done three-year longitudinal studies starting with 6th graders and tracked their Developmental Assets through 8th grade; from 7th grade to 10th grade; from 9th to 12th grade. The importance of these studies is that they've shown that a person's academic achievement, generosity and risk-taking behaviors are impacted when that person's Developmental Assets increase. There is a strong scientific basis to say that when you increase the number of Developmental Assets, wonderful outcomes occur for young people.

We assume there would be similar results if we were to study children from kindergarten to 3rd grade. We conduct studies beginning with 6th graders because the questions require a 5th or 6th grade reading

level. While you can conduct a similar study for younger children, such a survey would be a lot more expensive and complicated.

ACM: The Search Institute Web site has Developmental Assets Tools and content for newsletters that children's museums might find useful. Can you highlight any research or messages in your materials regarding the importance of play?

Benson: We do have a number of free resources available for educators, parents and organizations that regularly communicate with parents via email. You can view and download the materials at www.Search-Institute.org/digital-tools.

Play, especially children playing with their families, is an important element that appears in our Developmental Assets. In very young children, we identify that a child should have daily opportunities to play in ways that allow self-expression, physical activity and interaction with others. Under the rubric Constructive Use of Time, we identify that young children need to spend time at home participating in family activities and playing with their parents' guidance. Under the rubric Positive Values, we identify play as a means for children to develop a sense of equality and social justice. And for both young and older children, play is essential for developing social competencies such as planning, decision making and interpersonal skills such as cooperation.

Hear more from Dr. Benson at the InterActivity 2010 Closing Plenary Session on Saturday, May 8.