

A New Way of Building up People: Developmental Assets (or Life Nutrients)

"Young people aren't like how hey used to be. They don't have the respect for their elders like they did in my day. Their work ethic is poor. They are lazy. Look what they get up to now-a-days. They do graffiti, watching too much TV, playing on those stupid computer machines all day long. And what do they achieve? No wonder we have so many problems. When we were young, I used to have 2 jobs and had to help around the house. I got me an apprenticeship and worked my way up. There is nothing like good hard work."

This sounds like a familiar comment made by someone in their late 60's. Someone who had a strong sense of belonging, knowing what they were doing with their lives. Looking back on the ways things used to be, it is true, society has changed a great deal. Where there has been enormous progress in society, be it technological or social, life for a young person now is not what it used to be. Both good and bad things have developed.

What is evident is that the break up of the family unit has had negative impact in the way people act. Communities are shifting - often growing more as virtual rather than tangible. Isolation and loneliness are major issues many people are facing. As a result of that, attitudes about themselves and others around them are somewhat jaded and more widely varied. The bar to measure personal intimacy and relationships in many has been lowered.

But that is the bad side of things. On the more positive side, there are hundreds of excellent initiatives that are having very positive influences in people's lives. For young people, the Scouts and Guides, after school clubs, youth groups, Duke of Edinburgh Awards and many such initiatives are all having a positive impact. They give young people both a sense of belonging and a place to grow and develop.

For young adults in the UK, there are diverse and fantastic educational courses and facilitators. NVQ's, scholarships, BTEC's, the Prince's Trust (and the like) all work on a far more holistic approach to educating and enabling young people to grow and develop their skills.

For the business sector, the Investors in People initiative along with the growing movement to be more ethical in how we do business all also show how development is an ongoing positive process.

Most of these initiatives are effective - some more so than others. However, if questioned how exactly they are impacting a person's life, the conversation gets a little more complex. The measuring tools for impact are often quite broad and consequently not thorough. Often, some people take more away from an initiative than what was initially expected. Whereas for others, initial benefits 'wear off' within months. But what are those elements that worked for some? And why not for others?

To ensure that the primary role of public services is to support families and communities to improve children's outcomes.

Aiming high for children: supporting families. March 2007

"We will make our country the best place in the world for children to grow up"

*Ed Balls MP,
Secretary of State,
Department for Children,
Schools and Families,
Announcement of the
Government's Children's
Plan, 11 December 2007*

The logo for 'Life whys' features the word 'Life' in a bold, black, sans-serif font, with a green question mark icon above the letter 'i'. Below 'Life' is the word 'whys' in a lowercase, black, sans-serif font. A small green square is positioned between the two words.

Life whys

www.lifewhys.com

20 years ago, in North America, the Lutheran Brotherhood had the same questions. What was it that made people thrive. What were the factors that stop a person becoming involved in anti-social behaviour and help them reach their potential. They commissioned research to analyse all the studies on this subject. The findings were startling. From all the data they found and reviewed, they came up with the following facts:

For a person to thrive, there are a number of key factors they need in their lives. There are things that they need to know within themselves and there are factors they need around them to nurture them in their growth and development.

Coining a phrase, " you have a really good family - they are a real asset to you.", or " ..your background/family/education has been a real asset for you .." the researchers labeled these factors as Assets, or more scientifically, Developmental Assets.

Through their studies, they concluded that there are 40 Assets that a person needs to thrive. The fewer Assets they have, the more prone they are to underachieving and exhibiting anti-social behaviour. Conversely, the more Assets they have, the more likely they are to succeed at school and become positive members of the community.

Over the years, this Assets model approach has been used to develop and nurture over 3 million young people and children in North America alone. And it works.

Countless studies by many academics have all concluded that the Developmental Assets approach stands as a fact.

But that said, how does it affect us here in the UK? To answer that, we need to unpack what these Assets do.

'Get more Assets, and achieve more', is the mantra.

Assets build both peoples confidence and boost the support mechanisms around them. It gives them life skills that are not conventionally taught. Skills that some get, and others just don't. The number of Assets a person has is nothing to do with age, gender, class or race. It is based on the separate context each person is in.

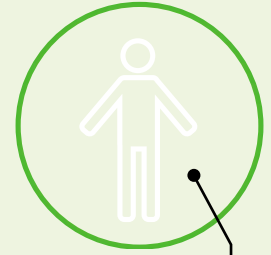
Now, lets make a shift in language. Renaming Assets, lets call them Life Nutrients. Everyone needs nutrients. People obsessed with their weight are always looking at the back of packaging to check out the nutrient content. How many calories has it got? Does it have Omega 3? What is my RDA? and so on.

If these Assets, or Life Nutrients were to be used as a normal tool to measure what is good for them, they would measure, and approach, certain activities and life differently.

Doing homework can stop being a chore that has to be done - it needs to be seen as beneficial. Things like music practice or personal reading, all have benefits that go beyond their obvious aims, they also help in life. However, unless we understand this, there is a real danger that forcing these activities can have a negative effect. Take me. The more I was forced to practice my clarinet, the more I resented playing it. As a result, do I play now? No. Do I remember anything about music? No.

And this is the key - positive development. Making development a trial or a punishment is negative development - we end up with developmental deficits and life poisons.

■ Continued overleaf....



EXTERNAL ASSETS

SUPPORT

- Family Support
- Positive Family Communication
- Other Adult Relationships
- Caring Neighbourhood

EMPOWERMENT

- Community Values Youth
- Youth as Resources
- Service to Others
- Safety

BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS

- Family Boundaries
- School Boundaries
- Neighbourhood Boundaries
- Adult Role Models
- Positive Peer Influence
- High Expectations

CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME

- Creative Activities
- Youth Programmes
- Faith Community
- Time at Home



www.lifewhys.com

Ok. So what, Assets are great.
How does it affect us?

It is a fair question, but lets look at what is already out there. There was a life development course that mentored adults with learning difficulties. The workers did a variety of fantastic activities, and as a result, had amazing results. However, when assessed why the impact on the people with learning difficulties was so positive, they had no idea why. They took on a Developmental Assets approach and they understood. As a result, they can now tailor their courses to 'intentionally' build in Assets, ensuring positive outcomes.

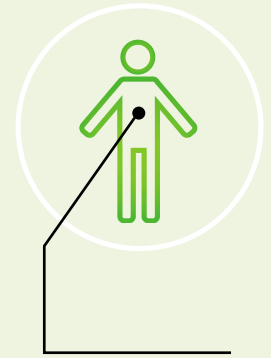
Charities desperate to get people to support them tended to rely on people's better nature. Trusting that if people in the UK realise the struggles many people are having in the third world, then they will respond. Tell a sad story, people will want to help. But it is not that easy. It's a crowded market. Many charities jostling for attention. Those that have been most successful have been those that have got their supporters to be active in their support. Using the Assets model, they have pitched it like this - As a supporter, if you do this , you will not only do good for our work but you will also do yourself good (in building up your Asset count). We only have to look to the number of sponsorship activities that are out there that encourage this. "Run a marathon, make yourself fit and raise cash for us at the same time." Result! The Assets approach show there are more ways to raise money.

The Police have a vital role in helping reduce anti-social behaviour. One solution that is born out of the Assets approach is Positive Ticketing. Pioneered with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, it is a method of building much needed positive relationships between the police and young people. The idea is that, instead of giving young people a ticket for bad behaviour, young people are given a ticket/reward voucher for good behaviour. The vouchers can be for music, food, clothing, mobile top-ups etc. The key to success has been the dual relational benefit of helping young people and the police in having a more positive view of each other – instead of a young person being fearful every time they see a police officer or a police officer automatically thinking of what bad thing a young person up to. As one result, in Richmond BC where this programme was first introduced, youth crime reduced by 41% over 3 years.

Another way to encourage Asset building is tapping into things that are young people's 'spark' - things that really get them going, their passions or interests - and to encourage them to pursue and share this more actively, particularly with adults as mentors. It could be writing, art, music, fishing, sport, etc, etc. These Sparks have proven, much like Positive Ticketing, to be amazing bridges to developing young peoples desire to build their own asset count with the support of positive adult involvement.

Using the Assets model has vast potential. Assets have their place in all of society. Building a persons potential, developing families and communities, developing business and effecting how we do education and social activities - these are all vital to us. Using the Assets approach is not to replace the structures and initiatives we have in place, Assets work best when they are bolted on to what we already have.

Who knows, perhaps one day, we will start having labeling of activities with the number of Assets they can gain by participating – it would bring a whole new dimension to 'fitness centres'. ■



INTERNAL ASSETS

COMMITMENT TO LEARNING

- Achievement Motivation
- School Engagement
- Personal Study
- Bonding to School
- Reading for Pleasure

POSITIVE VALUES

- Caring
- Equality and Social Justice
- Integrity
- Honesty
- Responsibility

SOCIAL COMPETENCIES

- Planning and Decision Making
- Interpersonal Competence
- Cultural Competence
- Resistance Skills
- Peaceful Conflict Resolution

POSITIVE IDENTITY

- Personal Power
- Self-Esteem
- Sense of Purpose
- Positive View of Personal Future

