

12-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Jones, K. R., Ashurst, K. L., & Kurzynske, J. (2007). County Extension Agents' Perceptions of Positive Developmental Assets for Vulnerable Youth. *The Journal of Extension*, 45(6), Article 13.
<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol45/iss6/13>

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County Extension Agents' Perceptions of Positive Developmental Assets for Vulnerable Youth

Abstract

A statewide assessment was conducted to determine county agents' perceptions toward key developmental assets in the lives of vulnerable youth and to identify an age group as a primary focus for Extension. Ninety-two percent of the 202 county agents responding to the rating scale agreed upon the need to focus on both youth leadership and personal values. Ninety-four percent of the agents also indicated that Extension should place emphasis on middle school youth as a high priority (in regard to programming). The findings conclude that there is relevance in assessing program efforts that promote positive development among youth.

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Introduction

In today's society, there are occurring issues that predispose youth to a multitude of risk factors. Youth development has evolved over the years to address broader concerns, thus going beyond the scope of prevention to emphasizing skill and competency building (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). With social ills being a culprit, one positive approach to elevating youth development has been to assure that programs are attaining desired results.

Effective youth programming entails an integration of family, school, and community efforts to promote positive development (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Lerner, 2004). The constant shift from prevention foci to more proactive appeals has instituted an infusion of the "building blocks of positive youth development" (Perkins, Borden, Keith, Hoppe-Rooney, & Villaruel, 2003, p. 10). These building blocks, most commonly known as "developmental assets" (Search Institute, 2005; also, see Benson, 1997; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998), are the key factors that help to ensure matriculation into productive, responsible adulthood.

As reported by researchers, the relationship between specific protective factors, such as developmental assets, can lead to healthy outcomes among youth (Benson et. al, 1998; Lerner, 2002; Werner & Smith, 1992). This may include intrinsic characteristics, such as personal values and social/interpersonal skills. On the other hand, external factors, such as adult support, community engagement, and youth leadership, may also play a role in advancing the abilities of youth. Scholars have also concluded that young people who are afforded such opportunities experience less risk and higher rates of positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000; Vandell & Posner, 1999).

Gathering information from those who live and work within high-risk communities can be an

effective way to address priority needs. Identifying potential concerns can aid in formulating concrete goals and objectives, such as providing youth with critical developmental assets. Moreover, youth-serving organizations, such as 4-H, can fill a desired niche in the communities in which they serve. As a result, the likelihood for sustainability is greatly increased through engaged community members. Furthermore, Extension and its community partners are viewed as valuable resources to assist in improving the lives of children, youth, and families.

This article presents findings from a needs assessment conducted to determine priority areas for youth. County 4-H Youth Development (4-HYD) and Family Consumer Sciences (FCS) agents were asked to complete a survey to determine their perceptions of what developmental assets are of most importance to the perpetuation of positive youth development. In addition, data were collected to help assess what target audience (i.e., age group of youth) is in most need of risk-reducing program efforts from Extension.

Background

In November 2000, Kentucky Child Now (a Kentucky 4-H partner) conducted a survey with over 12,000 young people from various communities throughout the state. The survey evaluated the status of 40 developmental assets--key characteristics as presented by Search Institute--that help young people make wise decisions, choose positive paths, and grow up competent, caring, and responsible. On average, Kentucky's youth had access to 19 of the assets, falling short of 21 others that were considered ideal. Equally shocking was that only 27% of the youth indicated they were given meaningful roles (i.e., recognized as leaders) in their community. Kentucky Child Now also proposed recommendations for more adequate programming and resources after conducting a statewide youth policy assessment that revealed gaps in youth services.

In 2001, Kentucky 4-H coordinated Community Conversations on the Future of Youth Development in 108 of the 120 counties in the state. This initiative involved 1,065 youth and 1,702 adults to identify the top issues that were most prevalent in the state. These conversations included dialogue on what actions are necessary to create the brightest future for youth and the entire community. An overwhelming majority of the responses centered upon young people having opportunities to develop essential leadership skills and be able to put them into practice as engaged citizens. In order to gather more data on the needs of youth within communities, the study reported here aimed to address the following questions:

1. Based on agents' perceptions, which key developmental assets are most important for meeting the needs of youth within communities?
2. In regard to program efforts, what age group (of youth) should receive the highest priority from Extension?
3. Is there a difference between 4-HYD and FCS agents' perceptions of the most important key developmental assets?
4. Is there a relationship between agents' perceived importance of key developmental assets?

Methods

The Kentucky Assessment of Needs for Youth at Risk Scale was developed by the state CYFAR (Children, Youth and Families at Risk) team to determine county agents' perceptions toward the importance of key developmental assets in the lives of vulnerable youth. The scale was also used to examine agents' perceptions of which age group (i.e., PreK-3; grades 4-6; grades 7-8; grades 9-12) should receive highest priority from Extension.

The following constructs (i.e., assets) were measured: adult support, youth leadership, personal values, and social competencies. Kentucky 4-HYD agents (n = 122) and FCS agents (n = 80) rated the four constructs on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1(not important at all) to 5 (very important) based on the level of importance to youth programming in their communities.

As a measure of reliability for the Assessment of Needs Scale, a pilot test was conducted with 4-HYD and FCS agents in Florida, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. Participants in the pilot test were not included in the actual study. The results of the pilot test revealed an overall Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .92. The reliability coefficients for each of the constructs were as follows: Adult Support (.80), Youth Leadership (.84), Personal Values (.77), and Social Competencies (.82).

The study assessed the perceptions of a total of 202 county Extension agents in Kentucky. The scale was administered in the fall of 2005 to 4-HYD agents during a statewide retreat and to the FCS agents during the statewide Annual FCS Update in-service. The scale consisted of 17 items classified into four (4) developmental assets serving as attitudinal constructs for the analysis: Adult Support (five items); Youth Leadership (five items); Personal Values (four items); Social Competencies (three items). Agents ranked each construct based on their perception of the need to focus on specific areas as pertinent developmental assets for youth (1=lowest priority, 5 =

highest priority).

Agents also ranked which age group of youth should receive highest priority in regard to program efforts from Extension. Independent t-tests were used to determine any significant differences between perceptions of the 4-HYD and FCS agents. Pearson correlations analyses were also conducted to determine any relationships between the perceived importance of key assets.

Results

Ninety-two percent (92%) of the total number of agents strongly agreed that there is a need to focus on both youth leadership and personal values (Table 1). Moreover, 94% of the county agents indicated that Extension, as a whole, should place emphasis on middle school youth as a high priority for youth programming (Table 2).

Table 1.
Agents Indicating a Need to Focus on Key Developmental Assets

County Agents	Adult Support		Youth Leadership		Personal Values/Life Skills		Social Competencies	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
4-H	112	91%	113	93%	115	94%	113	93%
FCS	75	94%	72	90%	72	90%	71	89%
Total	187	92%	185	91%	187	92%	184	91%

Note. Agents responded to the following: "There is a need to focus on _____ in my community". Scale ranged from 1 to 5. The frequency columns (above) indicate the total sum of agents agreeing and strongly agreeing (4 & 5 on rating scale) on each developmental asset.

Table 2.
Youth Audience That Should Be Targeted as a High Priority of Extension as Perceived by Agents

County Agents	PreK-3rd		4th-6th		7th-8th		9th-12th	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
4-H	36	18%	107	53%	117	58%	109	54%
FCS	58	29%	70	35%	73	36%	69	34%
Total	94	46%	177	88%	190	94%	178	88%

Note. Each age group was rated on a scale of 1 (lowest priority) to 5 (highest priority). The numbers in the frequency column include the sum of agents ranking age groups as 4 or 5.

Mean scores were computed for each of the developmental asset constructs, thus creating separate index variables (i.e., adult support, youth leadership, personal values, social competencies). A t-test was used to determine significant differences in perceptions of the developmental assets between 4-HYD and FCS agents. As shown in Table 3, both 4-HYD and FCS agents perceived all assets to be important or very important to youth in the state. Hence, there was no significant difference found between the perceptions of the 4-HYD and FCS agents on any of the four constructs.

Table 3.
A Comparison of 4-H Youth Development and Family Consumer Sciences Agents' Perceptions Toward the Importance of Key Developmental Assets

	4-H Youth Development Agents (n=122)		Family & Consumer Sciences (n=80)		F	p
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Adult Support	4.44	.44	4.39	.45	.10	.75
Youth Leadership	4.48	.40	4.39	.48	1.35	.25
Personal Values	4.56	.47	4.61	.42	.19	.66
Social Competencies	4.45	.49	4.42	.51	.21	.64

Note. Agents responded to the following question: "To what extent is ___ important to the youth in your community". Scale ranged from 1(not important at all) to 5 (very important). $p > .05$.

Given that the t-test model results revealed no significant differences between the perceptions of the Kentucky 4-HYD and FCS agents, Pearson's correlations analyses were used to determine relationships between the importance of specified developmental assets as perceived by agents. There were significant, positive relationships found between perceptions toward adult support, youth leadership, personal values and social competencies.

Moderate, positive correlations were found between: adult support and youth leadership($r = .53$, $p < .01$); youth leadership and personal values ($r = .56$, $p < .01$); youth leadership and social competencies ($r = .54$, $p < .01$); personal values and social competencies($r = .52$, $p < .01$). Although statistically significant, adult support and personal values($r = .38$, $p < .01$) and adult support and social competencies ($r = .30$, $p < .01$) had lower correlations.

Table 4.
Correlations of Agents' Perceived Level of Importance toward Developmental Assets

		1	2	3	4
1. Adult Support	Pearson	-----	.530	.387	.305
	Sig.		.000	.000	.000
	N		198	199	201
2. Youth Leadership	Pearson		--	.564	.548
	Sig.			.000	.000
	N			197	199
3. Personal Values	Pearson			---	.524
	Sig.				.000
	N				200
4. Social Competencies	Pearson				---
	Sig.				
	N				

Note. Correlation Matrix only includes significant relationships. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Conclusions & Implications

Although middle school-aged youth were viewed as a primary target audience, no significant differences were found between the perceptions of the 4-H YD and FCS agents. However, there were positive relationships between agents' perceptions toward the importance of key assets for youth development. Agents who felt as though adult support was very important to nurturing youth development also felt that youth leadership, personal values, and social competencies were important developmental assets. Hence, this finding suggests that if agents are to collaborate on youth programs, there should be some consistency in determining what assets are essential.

These findings are consistent with the literature that indicates the need for youth to have access to caring adults and opportunities to develop life skills (Jarret, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Ferrari, 2003; Scheer, 1997). Youth leadership and social competencies were also ranked high as being important to the youth development process. Scholars have reported that youth having opportunities to take on meaningful roles foster decision-making abilities and leadership and social skills (Checkoway, 1996; Flanagan & Faison, 2001). These findings indicate that the agents are aware of the importance of key developmental assets that can strengthen the lives of young people.

Based on these findings, Extension should conduct periodic assessments to prioritize youth program efforts. Emphasis should be placed on age groups in most need of age-appropriate programming. In the case of the study reported here, youth in middle school were deemed the audience that could benefit the most from Extension programs. Due to this critical time of transitions for youth, Extension and other youth-serving organizations must take a proactive stance to ensure their well-being. Moreover, organizations must remain conscientious not to neglect middle school youth in a quest to address the issues of younger children and adolescents.

Collaborations among all Extension programs (i.e., 4-HYD, FCS, and Agriculture/Natural Resources) would also be useful in designing and evaluating programs that promote positive development

among youth within communities. Extension staff may also want to solicit the opinions of those youth and adults directly affected by programs. While creating attractive opportunities for specific target audiences, this information is especially relevant for developing strategies that ensure sustainability among youth programs in the future.

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