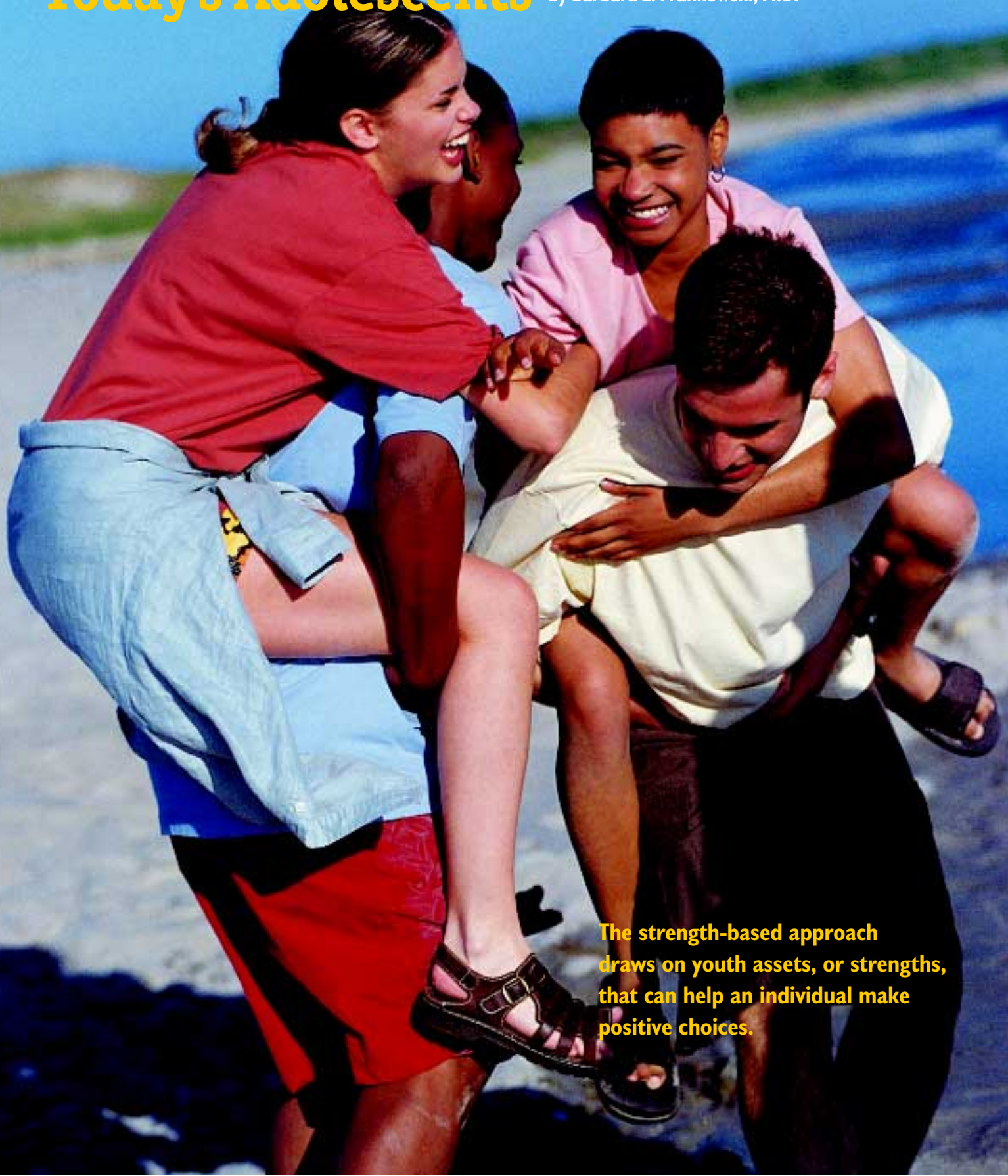


Positive Psychology for Today's Adolescents

by Barbara L. Frankowski, M.D.



The strength-based approach draws on youth assets, or strengths, that can help an individual make positive choices.

“Don’t just tell me what I can’t do—tell me what I CAN do!”

“Help me believe that what’s right with me is more powerful than what is wrong with me!”

“How can I protect my son from risky behaviors? I’m so worried he won’t turn out right!”

“How can I help my daughter prepare for adulthood? She doesn’t always stop and think things out clearly.”

While the teenage years can be stressful and difficult for anyone, youth with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) can have particular problems navigating the difficult decisions that must be made in their daily lives. Parents want to know what they can do to “protect” their children and teens from risky behaviors. And professionals who deal with youth—teachers, physicians, program organizers—want to do the right thing also.

A common approach has been to warn youth to avoid the six behaviors that lead to the most serious health problems, both now and in the future (see right). For teens, this approach may feel as if everyone is saying, “Don’t do this,” and “Don’t do that,” giving them very little to feel positive about. According to the World Health Organization, health involves much more than simply the absence of disease; health involves optimal physical, mental, social and emotional functioning and well-being.

Now, across the United States, community organizations are trying a new approach called positive youth development (also known as a strength-based approach). This approach draws on youth assets, or strengths, that can help an individual make positive choices. An early worker in this field, Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., of Search Institute, put together a list of 40 developmental assets. These assets have been shown to be positively linked with increased healthy behaviors and fewer risk behaviors in adolescents (www.search-institute.org/assets/forty.html).

The protective value of these assets holds true across all socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups. Fortunately, adolescents do not need to have all the assets in order to do well; developing just one or two can make a difference in having a healthier lifestyle. Because of these amazing benefits, the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs recently adopted positive youth development as one of the guiding principles for the development of policies and programs to maximize the health of adolescents.

For the older adolescent who needs to be thinking about life skills, the READY framework developed by Paula Duncan, M.D., youth health director of the

Risky Behaviors

1. **Poor nutrition**
2. **Inadequate physical activity**
3. **Substance abuse (including tobacco and alcohol)**
4. **Risky sexual behaviors (leading to sexually transmitted disease and unintended pregnancy)**
5. **Unsafe behaviors (not using a helmet or seatbelt, driving while intoxicated)**
6. **Violent behaviors, mental health issues (leading to homicide or suicide)**

READY for Life by Paula Duncan, M.D.

Relationships: Does your child build strong relationships with friends, other students, coworkers and family? A teen who feels strong bonds with family members and friends has a major strength. A primary goal of parents is to love and connect with their children. Children are much more likely than parents may think to adopt their parents' values, especially when they feel loved and connected.

Energy: It's the energy youth give to the things they enjoy. Many parents of strong, resilient teens have spent considerable effort helping their youngsters find activities that they enjoy and that give them a way to participate happily.

Awareness: It's the awareness of the world around them, their place in the world and their contribution. A healthy adolescent is growing into that awareness. That awareness is leading to a sense of

direction and belonging, of learning how to make his or her contribution. One way to develop this strength is through volunteer activities. Parents can help their teens learn to be contributors, enjoying a positive relationship with their community.

Decision-maker: Adolescents who know how to get things done and can control their behavior will have an important strength in avoiding risky behavior. Parents can have an important role in providing opportunities for their youth to become successful decision makers.

Yes: A strong teen will say, "Yes," to healthy behavior; he or she will eat well, play hard, work hard. Parents can help by modeling that healthy behavior and affirming it when they see it in their own children.

Vermont Child Health Improvement Program, can be helpful (see sidebar opposite).

Health care providers who work with young people are also starting to develop a strength-based approach to providing adolescent health care. Along with asking about risks, many clinicians are asking about strengths. Vermont clinicians who tried this approach found that it helped them build better, more trusting relationships with their patients.

Talking about "what's going well" gives them a broader perspective of their patients' lives and experiences and builds rapport. This rapport facilitates later discussion on sensitive topics, such as the need to change a particular behavior. It can also help parents see their adolescent in a different light—not as a struggling student who often gets into trouble, but as a caring, competent individual on the way to becoming an adult.

Search Institute's 40 assets is the most complete framework, but clinicians and parents need a simpler framework to conceptualize youth strengths. Frameworks provide shorthand descriptions of the qualities associated with fewer risk behaviors.

The Forum for Youth Investment suggests Karen J. Pittman's five Cs: **confidence, character, connection, competence and contribution**. The Circle of Courage framework, based on the work of Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (www.reclaiming.com), has been successfully used by clinicians in Vermont. It was developed

The Circle of Courage Philosophy: Encouraging Strengths through Dialogue

| Strength | Message If Strength Is Present | Message If Strength Is Lacking |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Generosity | Your willingness to care for others is inspiring. It shows generosity, and this is an important strength for you to develop. | I'd like you to think about sharing your obvious athletic skill with others, maybe some younger kids? You've done really well at developing in this area. Another strength to develop right now is generosity. |
| Independence | I am very impressed with your decision to stop hanging out with those friends. I know it must have been difficult, but it showed independence and this is an important trait for you to develop at this time. | I'm wondering if there is something we can do to help you start finding your own way and developing your independence. |
| Mastery | You should feel really good about finishing this school year. I know it took a lot of hard work, but you did it! You showed mastery of an important area. | Developing mastery in an area is something that will help you feel good about yourself. Let's think about how you might be able to develop this strength. What do you like to do? |
| Belonging | You have a lot of strong relationships in your life. I know this sense of belonging must be a lot of help to you when times get tough. | It is important to develop relationships to help you during this stage of your life. Can we think of some people you might be able to rely on when you need it? |



by Larry K. Brendtro, Ph.D., based on his work with Native American youth in serious trouble and includes:

- Generosity:** I care about others
- Independence:** I can make decisions. I can influence my world.
- Mastery:** I can succeed. I am good at something.
- Belonging:** I am loved. I am important to somebody.

These were the qualities the youth needed to develop in order to get themselves out of their difficult situations. It would seem to work with any youth dealing with special challenges (see sidebar above).

Remember, very few adolescents have all the strengths, but all adolescents will have at least one or two. Young adolescents can be asked to describe what they like about themselves or what they think their friends like most about them. Older adolescents can be "interviewed" for a job: "If I was looking to hire someone, tell me what makes YOU the best person for this job." Parents are key in building on strengths once they have been identified. Parents should be able to quickly identify what makes them most proud of their son or daughter.

There are many things that parents of youth with AD/HD can do to boost their children's strengths or assets.

- Pick a framework for strengths that works for you and your family and start to think about how you can use it with your teen at home.
- Ask if your local schools use a strength-based approach with all students. Request that your student's strengths be reviewed at all individual education plan (IEP) or other meetings before talking about the challenges your student faces. It is much easier to face challenges when you know your strengths.
- If your child's health care provider is not using a strength-based approach, show him or her this article. They can check out the Web sites and sources listed above to get ideas of how to put this approach into practice.
- Find out if your local youth organizations are promoting strengths. If so, get your child involved in these programs, especially if they can help strengthen assets that need work. ■

Barbara L. Frankowski, M.D., is professor of pediatrics at the University of Vermont College of Medicine and a pediatrician in Burlington, Vermont. She is the health consultant for the local school district and the chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health. Dr. Frankowski is also involved in health improvement research through the Vermont Child Health Improvement Program.