

# Have I Got a Deal for You: A FREE Guide to Raising Healthy, Thriving Kids

by Steve Fortier

I can see the infomercial in my mind. The guy that gets us all excited about the Shamwow hops in front of the camera and, with great enthusiasm, shouts out, “Parents, would you like your kids to keep away from cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs?” In unison, the studio’s live audience shouts back an impassioned, “YES!” “Would you like them to be successful in school, maintain a healthy lifestyle and contribute to the betterment of their community?” Again, a loud chorus of, “YES!” “Do you hope that they will delay sexual activity and bond well with people from all types of different backgrounds?” “YES!”

The audience, both in the studio and watching at home, are primed. This seems even more unbelievable than a little piece of fabric being able to mop up a bunch of water. But, to everyone’s surprise, the Shamwow guy doesn’t reach under his table to pull out a magical pill to sell them. He’s not even pitching something you can buy in “four eeeeeeeasy payments!” Instead, he starts talking about Developmental Assets. Fade cameras.

I’m not sure if a Shamwow can actually absorb a bunch of water with a single swipe, but I am certain that the Developmental Assets model is the most effective approach to helping young people avoid risk behaviors and demonstrate thriving behaviors. There is not enough space in this article to go into great detail about each of the forty assets. I’ll end the article with a link at which you can delve more into what you can do to promote the assets in your child and others with whom you have contact. Hopefully, through this article, I will excite and inspire you enough to want to learn more.

To date, more than 3 million young people in grades six through 12 (including those at most middle and high schools in Cheshire and Windham counties) have completed a Developmental Assets survey. The results are powerful. There is a direct correlation between the number of assets a young person reports experiencing and the rates at which they are involved in a number of risk behaviors or thriving indicators. The more assets a young person reports experiencing, the less likely they are to be involved in a number of risk behaviors and the more likely they are to display several positive behaviors. In contrast, the fewer assets a young person experiences, the more likely they are to be involved in risky behaviors and the less likely they are to thrive. Developmental Assets not only protect kids from behaviors that are of concern to us parents, they also promote many positive attributes we hope our kids will possess.

The Developmental Assets framework was developed two decades ago by the Search Institute, a Minneapolis-based research and education non-profit. Guided by the question, “Why do some kids struggle while others thrive... even within the same family, neighborhood or community?” Their research led them to forty building blocks whose presence or absence seemed to influence which way a young person would go. They called these building blocks Developmental Assets. Twenty of the assets are what Search Institute has called “Internal Assets.” These are skills that we as parents along with our

kids' teachers, coaches, friends and others hope to develop in our young people—things like interpersonal and conflict resolution skills, and values such as caring, responsibility, and social justice. The other twenty assets have been labeled by Search Institute as “External Assets.” These assets describe the environments that we, as parents and adults, create for young people—things like family support, a caring out-of-home environment (school, after-school programs, sports teams, etc.), and giving children meaningful roles at home, at school, and in their community.

In my work promoting the Developmental Assets approach to positive youth development, I stress one key point regardless of the audience—no one set of people is solely responsible for developing healthy, thriving young people. As parents, we could develop all of the assets within our direct control and still not provide our kid with enough to put the odds in favor of them thriving. As parents, we need to ensure that all of the environments in which our children live, learn and play are asset-rich. We need to be involved with our children's school to support their efforts to build assets. We need to connect with our neighbors so that our neighborhoods are safe and supportive. We need to be sure that our kid's pre-school teachers, youth sports coaches, music and drama instructors, and after-school program staff model and develop positive values and social skills. Together, guided by the Developmental Assets approach, we can help our young people avoid risky behaviors and give them the building blocks that will help them thrive.

For more on the Developmental Assets and what you can do to promote them with the young people in your life, go to the website of the Fall Mountain Area Healthy Youth Initiative at [www.fmahyi.org](http://www.fmahyi.org). Log on in the next 15 minutes and we'll throw in a free... ah, never mind. I'll leave that to the Shamwow guy.

*Steve Fortier is Executive Director of Meeting Waters YMCA which serves the communities of the Fall Mountain, Brattleboro, Bellows Falls and Springfield regions. He has been using and promoting the Developmental Assets approach to positive youth development since 1987. Steve is a co-creator of a community youth development program that has been recognized as one of ten Exemplary Prevention Programs in the country. He's the author of one book and a contributor to several others on the subject of positive youth development and his training and consulting services have impacted communities in most states in the US and in more than two dozen foreign countries. Steve is a national trainer on Asset Development for YMCA of the USA, the Y system's national resource center. Locally, Steve has served as volunteer leader of two asset-building coalitions, one in Windham County and another in the Fall Mountain region. He lives in Alstead with his wife, Sue, and their two thriving teens.*

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