A Developmental Approach to Youth Ministry

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Religious youth work is at a crossroads in American Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities," contends Kendra Dean.[1] She continues, "On the one hand, these communities are serving youth in more ways than ever before; on the other hand, fewer adolescents are actively involved in the corporate life of the religious community than a generation ago."[2] We may argue that there are fewer youth these days and that this accounts for the decline in numbers. Yet the fact remains that a smaller *percentage* of young people are involved in the religious community than in the previous generation.

At the same time, social concern for the development of adolescents has never been greater. Almost everyone has an answer to assure that adolescents develop appropriately: stop sex education in schools, impose more discipline at home and in school, give more homework, limit the amount of time watching television, teach values in the schools, build bigger and better and more expensive youth programs. Benson, Scales, Leffert, and Roehlkepartain put it this way:

> People everywhere are looking for solutions. The most common response is to identify problems (chemical use, delinquency, school dropout, teen pregnancy, violence) and then seek to reduce them through prevention programs, early intervention, and social services. When problems persist, communities turn to increasingly expensive treatments and/or incarcerations, further straining community resources and patience. It is important to try to control and reduce problems. However, the problem-centered approach rarely works by itself.[3]

What they describe for society in general is also true of the church.

I propose a different approach to the problem. We could call it a developmental approach to youth ministry. The purpose of this article is to examine the developmental approach and glean from it essential principles to guide youth ministry in our churches and communities.

A Developmental Approach to Youth Ministry

For more than a decade, the Search Institute in Minneapolis has worked diligently to review research related to adolescent development. They then compile the data to present a comprehensive view of what children and youth need to thrive. This approach was first introduced in the 1990 report *The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6th–12th Graders*. At that time, the Institute identified 30 developmental assets (now expanded to 40). Further studies have continued to analyze these hypotheses by studying over 350,000 youth in 6th–12th grades in more than 600 communities.[4] The findings have profound implications for the church and for youth ministry.

The most recent work of this group is reported in *A Fragile Foundation*. Using *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* as a survey instrument, the research group measured assets, deficits, risky behaviors, and thriving indicators of 99,462 6th–12th graders in 213 schools in 25 states in 1996–97. The

population surveyed was fairly equally distributed over the seven grade levels. The Midwest had a larger representation than any other region of the country, as did Caucasians and those living in communities of 2,500 or more. Males and females were equally represented. Though the study does not use a stratified random sampling model, the figures reasonably represent national demographics except for residence.

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As a check for the data, the results of this study were compared to another conducted by the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention and reported in *1997 Youth at Risk Surveillance Study*. The results of the two studies were within 5–7% of each other with two exceptions. The U.S. Center reported a higher incidence of sexual intercourse in the U.S. Center Study (48% to 39% in the Search study) and a lower incidence of attempted suicide (8% compared to 16% in the Search study). However, the results are matched closely enough to conclude that the Search study represents youth fairly.

Based on its studies, the Search Institute concluded that 40 assets are important to the development of children and youth. An asset is defined as a factor that contributes to healthy development. These are divided into categories, some internal and others external. Each of these categories will be surveyed in the following paragraphs.

Support

Healthy adolescent development seems to require six support factors: family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, caring neighborhood, caring school climate, and parental involvement in schooling. Amazingly, there was only one factor that over half (64%) of the young people surveyed experience: family support. Less than 30% affirm the existence of positive family communication, caring school climate, and parental involvement in schooling. Predictably, the factors are more common among 6th graders, but decrease through the 12th grade. Yet only one other factor—caring neighborhood—has as much as a 50% frequency for 6th graders![5]

Benson, *et al* suggest two reasons for this relative lack of support. First, virtually every community suffers from extreme age segregation. Youth are separated from adults in neighborhoods, schools, and churches. Second, a subtle message penetrates our society that adolescence is a turbulent period during which teens don't want parents around. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

Empowerment

Four factors have been identified as essential for empowering teens: the community values youth, youth are seen as resources, youth are involved in service to others, and youth feel safe. Two of these factors are reported at a frequency of 50% or just above: service and safety. The other two have frequencies of less than 30%. Contrary to the factors in the previous category, these change little over the six years. However, females rate somewhat better than males.[6]

These results are somewhat astonishing in a country that expends a significant amount of money on its youth. Yet youth do not perceive this as valuing them. Spending money on them does not tell our youth that we care about them as much as our relationships with them do. It appears that they need more adult interaction, fewer expensive programs.

Boundaries and Expectations

The category of "boundaries and expectations" includes six assets: family boundaries, school boundaries, neighborhood boundaries, adult role models, positive peer influence, and high expectations. Only

one—positive peer influence—was perceived as applicable by more than half of those surveyed (60%). Unfortunately, adult role models were cited only 27% of the time.

Major changes occur in this category between 6th and 12th grades. For example, 6th graders perceive having only one factor below 50%—adult role models. That increases to two factors in 7th grade when the perceived existence of family boundaries falls below 50%. It increases to three in 9th grade (high expectations joins the list). By 10th grade, teens report only positive peer influence 50% or more of the time. The same remains true among 11th and 12th graders.[7] Although all the results are disturbing, perhaps most unsettling is that youth experience *twice as much positive influence from peers as from adult role models.* Have adults simply abdicated their responsibility to shape the next generation?

Constructive Use of Time

Under the category of "constructive use of time" are four factors: involvement in creative activities, involvement in youth programs (non-religious), involvement in religious communities, and time at home. Surprisingly, 50% or more young people reported three of these factors, with the highest percentage (64) indicating involvement in areligious community. Only one area sustains less than 50% teen involvement: creative activities. The figures remain stable over the seven-year span.[8]

Closer analysis of the data, however, indicates that though 64% of youth are involved in their religious community, it is more often for no more than an hour a week. Only 19% report involvement of three or more hours per week.[9]

Commitment to Learning

Five factors are included in a commitment to learning: achievement motivation, school engagement, homework, bonding to school, and reading for pleasure. Three of these factors are reported by 50% or more teens—achievement motivation (63%), school engagement (64%), and bonding to school (51%). These figures remain stable over the seven-year period. A higher percentage of females report these factors than males. Eighth graders report the lowest figures, with the figures increasing or remaining stable from the 9th through 12th grades.[10]

Positive Values

This survey included six positive values: caring, equality and social justice, integrity, honesty, responsibility, and restraint. Three of these—integrity, honesty, and responsibility—were reported at 60% or higher. All others were below 50%. Interestingly, 6th graders rated all values at 50% or higher as did 7th graders. But 8th–12th graders rated only integrity, honesty, and responsibility at 50% or better. Adolescents hold these values more strongly as they grow older. Females, however, are at least 10 percentage points higher than males on all items.[11]

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Social Competencies

Planning and decision-making, interpersonal competency, cultural competency, resistance skill, and peaceful conflict resolution comprise what are considered social competencies. Unfortunately, none is reported by more than 50% in any age group, outside of a 54% report by 6th graders who note peaceful conflict resolution.[12]

Positive Identity

The four assets of a positive identity are a sense of personal power, self-esteem, sense of purpose, and positive view of personal future. Half of the factors (sense of purpose and positive view of personal future) were reported by more than half of the teens surveyed. Interestingly, for 6th and 11th graders, only personal power did not reach 60%. All four factors were reported at 50% or higher by 12th graders.[13]

IMPLICATIONS

The Search study then examines how many of these assets are experienced by those at each grade level. The results are frightening.

Table 1
Assets Experienced at Each Age Level[14]
By Percentage

Grade	0–10	11–20	21–30	31–40	Average
6	10	35	40	15	21.5
7	15	38	35	12	19.8
8	22	41	19	8	17.8
9	22	43	28	7	17.4
10	23	45	27	5	16.9
11	22	47	27	5	16.9
12	19	49	28	4	17.2

Overall, teens experience an average of 18 assets. In only one case—6th graders—do youth experience more than half of the assets at a higher than 50% level, and this with barely more than half of the assets. No appreciable differences are found if the data are analyzed by ethnicity, gender, mother's educational level, or type of community.[15]

The report then considers deficits. These are identified as unsupervised time alone at home, television overexposure, physical abuse, victim of violence, and drinking. Only one—drinking problems—was reported by more than half (57%). Predictably, the frequency goes up each year from 6th to 12th grade. None of these are reported by more than half of 6th graders. But 80% of 12th graders report attending one or more drinking parties during the past year, and over 40% of the youth report unsupervised time alone. Table 2 charts involvement rates in at-risk behaviors.

Table 2
Percentage of Youth Participating Reporting Deficits
By Number[16]

Number of Deficits	Total	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
0	15	26	23	17	13	11	0	8
1	27	29	28	25	25	28	26	29
2	27	24	25	25	27	28	30	32
3	19	14	14	19	20	21	20	21
4	10	5	8	10	11	11	10	9
5	3	1	1	3	3	3	3	3

Notably, 69% of youth report experiencing two or fewer deficits, though those numbers change significantly from 6th to 12th grades. As the chart reveals, 79% of 6th graders report two or fewer deficits. By the 8th grade, that percentage has fallen to 67%, a relatively consistent average for the remainder of the groups surveyed. But to think of fully one-third of secondary school students having three or more deficits gives pause.

Next, the Search report considers the frequency of at-risk behaviors. The at-risk behaviors and their frequencies are: alcohol use (three or more times in the last 30 days), tobacco use (one or more cigarettes a day), illicit drug use (three or more times in the last year), sexual intercourse (three or more times in lifetime), depression and suicide attempts, anti-social behavior (three or more incidents in the past year), violence (three or more acts in past year), school problems (skipping school two or more times in the past 4 weeks and/or below C grade point average), driving while drinking (driven while drunk or ridden in a car with a drunk driver three or more times in the past year), and gambling (three or more times in past year). The frequency ranges from a low of 18% (sexual intercourse and illicit drug use) to a high of 33% (violence). The numbers of individuals reported in these patterns are indicated in the following table.

Table 3
Percentages Involved in At-Risk Behaviors[17]

Number of At-Risk Behaviors Involved In	Percentage	Number of At-Risk Behaviors Involved In	Percentage
0	33	6	5
1	20	7	4
2	13	8	3
3	9	9	1
4	7	10	1
5	6		

Though nearly two-thirds of youth report involvement in two or fewer at-risk behaviors, any at-risk behavior has potential dangers for the present and for the future. With one-third of youth involved in more than two at risk behaviors, we must have high concern for them.

One must note the protective results of developmental assets in preventing involvement in at-risk behaviors. This consideration makes clear the power of a developmental approach.

The results presented in table 4 are nothing short of astounding. Adding assets is clearly connected to reducing at-risk behaviors. But does it work positively as well? Do the assets improve a youth's chances of thriving? The data in Table 5 makes this case.

Based on the data, we must conclude that the Search Institute reports something vitally important to youth as a whole, and to the church in particular. Increasing assets increases positive behaviors and reduces negative behaviors. If every young person could experience 21 or more assets, think of the problems that would be significantly reduced. Yet tragically, the average youth claims fewer than 20 of these assets.

Table 4
Protective Results of Developmental Assets
From Involvement in At-Risk Behaviors[18]

At-Risk Behavior	0–10 Assets Percentage Involved	11–20 Assets Percentage Involved	21–30 Assets Percentage Involved	31–40 Assets Percentage Involved
Alcohol Problems	53	30	11	3
Tobacco Use	30	21	19	21
Drug Use	42	19	6	1
Sexual Intercourse	33	21	10	3
Depression and Suicide	40	25	13	4
Anti-social Behavior	52	23	7	1
Violence	61	35	16	6
School Problems	43	19	7	2
Driving and Alcohol	42	24	10	4
Gambling	34	23	13	6

Table 5
Percentages With Various Levels of Assets
Demonstrating Thriving Indicators[19]

Thriving Indicator	0–10 Assets	11–20 Assets	21–30 Assets	31–40 Assets
Succeeding in School	7	19	35	53
Helping Others	69	83	91	97
Valuing Diversity	39	53	69	87
Maintaining Good Health	25	46	69	88
Exhibiting Leadership	48	67	78	87
Resisting Danger	6	15	29	43
Delaying Gratification	27	42	56	72
Overcoming Adversity	57	69	79	86

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH MINISTRY

It seems clear that a church-based youth ministry needs to include far more than teaching Sunday School, conducting a youth meeting each week, and encouraging youth to attend worship regularly. In fact, it appears that an effective youth ministry will join forces with family, community, and school programs designed to serve youth. In so doing, it will meet the deepest needs of our youth.

Another survey conducted by the Search Institute examines youth involved in congregations. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain and Peter C. Scales report their findings in *Youth and Congregations* (1995). They identify the following characteristics of youth:

1. A time of change—puberty, growing sense of independence, new intellectual capacities, and making decisions about vocation, values, and education.
2. A time of developing an identity—coming to terms with sexuality, and developing a plan for the future.
3. A time of emerging risks.
4. Social problems—friendship, use of time, negative perceptions by adults, having to grow up too fast.[20]

Any youth ministry worth its keep must address these issues as well as teach faith content.

Kendra Dean points out that religious involvement and religious knowledge do not necessarily guarantee effective youth development; it may only innoculate them against religion. One Search Institute report indicated that even among young people actively involved in a faith community, 71% are involved in at least one at-risk behavior.[21] In short, we can conclude that youth ministry involves significantly more than a good youth meeting.

Two elements are most important for teens to accept the teaching and behavior presented in a congregation's classes and programs. One is a perception that teachers and leaders are warm and accepting. The second is the frequency of attendance. Some research indicates that a more important factor is the value a young person places on religion. This may better predict a teenager's acceptance of a congregation's teachings than mere involvement in its activities.[22]

The reports we have considered thus far can provide specific guiding principles for effective youth work. I offer the following observations.

1. A youth ministry will only be as effective as the ability of its leaders to escape the church "ghetto." Get involved with others in the community who are committed to serving youth. Stop perceiving church, school, and community as competing elements.
2. Design youth programs to meet developmental needs. By that I do not mean that we should abdicate our responsibility to provide spiritual content and direction. But that content and direction can and must be applied to the real needs of youth. All too many programs are aimed at something other than the needs identified in the reports discussed here.
3. Effective youth ministry must be family ministry. Youth are the products of families, for good or ill. Some youth behaviors are not likely to change until family behavior is altered.
4. Provide a healthy dose of interaction with adults of all ages, not merely with the youth leaders. Values are most effectively taught by the second generation beyond the group who is learning.
5. Involve caring leaders. These should be mature adults who have worked through their own identity and spiritual issues. Be wary of relying too heavily on young adults in their 20s to lead youth.
6. Invest significant effort in mentoring and preparing leaders who in turn will mentor and prepare youth.
7. Emphasize serving rather than being served.
8. Develop a values base for the ministry. Scripture does teach the values identified as youth assets.

9. Develop leadership among youth. Allow them use their talents to serve the whole body of Christ.

10. Be bold enough to develop means of reaching youth who are most at risk. Reaching out in this way may create some discomfort, but it can make a lasting difference for some kids.

This kind of ministry takes time—time more than money. It takes commitment. It requires perseverance. But these principles make the difference between healthy, effective youth ministry and a mere youth program.

CONCLUSION

Pundits will continue to propose all kinds of solutions to the problems clearly evident among youth. Some will be simplistic, some complicated and expensive. Perhaps new evidence will emerge to alter the conclusions proposed in this article. Meanwhile, churches and youth workers need not consider youth ministry an indecipherable mystery. A developmental approach—understanding the assets youth need and working together with others to provide them—provides a positive model for youth ministry. This approach requires work, but our youth are worth the effort!

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ENDNOTES

1. Kendra Dean, *A Synthesis of the Research on and a Descriptive Overview of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish Religious Youth Programs in the United States* (New York: Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1991), 33.
2. Ibid.
3. Peter L. Benson, Peter C. Scales, Nancy Leffert, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *A Fragile Foundation* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1999), 1.
4. Benson, 6.
5. Benson, 17
6. Benson, 19.
7. Benson, 21.
8. Benson, 23.
9. Benson, 23.
10. Benson, 23.
11. Benson, 27.
12. Benson, 29.
13. Benson, 31.
14. Benson, 34–36.
15. Benson, 37–39.
16. Benson, 46–48.
17. Benson, 55–60.
18. Benson, 75.
19. Benson, 80ff.
20. Peter C. Scales and Eugene Roehlkepartain, *Youth and Congregations* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1995), 18–22.
21. Scales and Roehlkepartain, 51.
22. Scales and Roehlkepartain, 52.