



A Method of Presenting Key Concepts Regarding Positive Youth Development to Community Audiences¹

Daniel F. Perkins²

Have you ever been asked to give a presentation about youth to a group of teachers (or parents, or county commissioners) and struggled with how to best present the information? The purpose of this brief article is to describe some ways of presenting key concepts regarding positive youth development to the public. Instead of a focus on problems, one can use these presentations as an opportunity to educate about a positive approach to youth development. Positive youth development means providing youth with the necessary opportunities for them to acquire a broad range of competencies and to demonstrate a full complement of connections to self, others, and the larger community (Pittman, 1992; Pittman and Zeldin, 1994; Takanishi, 1993).

This article is based on my experience in presenting key concepts about positive youth development to many experienced practitioners and policymakers. The research findings about positive youth development are quantitative, linear, and clear; the daily lives of adolescents, which the practitioners viewed, were nonlinear, qualitative, and complex. As the “teacher” I also became the “student” and the students “teachers.” This experience has led me to conclude that in a community setting when working with people directly involved with youth, teaching is clearly an iterative process. The process is very exciting because this reciprocal relationship creates a learning opportunity for all who are involved.

In this article, I tackle the question of “What to present” and “How to present it.” Of course, there are multiple answers to those questions. Here, however, I will provide one example of how I answered those questions in a presentation that I made about key concepts regarding positive youth development. The key concepts are:

1. assets are negatively (inversely) related to risk behaviors and
2. there is a cumulative effect among assets, that is, the more assets a youth has, the less likely he or she is to engage in risk behaviors.

There is an enormous amount of information about positive youth development contained in the social science literature (see *Appendix A*). Thus, it is important to have a systematic and organized approach to present the important points. One organizational approach that I have found very successful when presenting the findings to a community group is:

1. to identify a *few* clear concepts — usually no more than three; and
2. to present the concepts using a variety of learning styles.

-
1. This document is Fact Sheet FCS 2114, a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Development, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: November 1996. The author wishes to thank Theresa M. Ferrari for her review of and comments on this publication.
 2. Daniel F. Perkins, assistant professor, Human Resource Development, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap, or national origin. For information on obtaining other extension publications, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office. Florida Cooperative Extension Service/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences/University of Florida/Christine Taylor Waddill, Dean

Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences suggests that using multiple strategies will enhance learning. He proposes that there are seven types of intelligence:

- verbal-linguistic
- mathematical logical
- music
- bodily/kinesthetic
- visual/spatial, and
- the personal intelligences
 - interpersonal (between persons) and
 - intrapersonal (within oneself).

Typically, we rely on verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical methods. However to enhance learning, one should make use of several methods that tap into the various intelligences.

For the purposes of this article I will outline examples of the two above-noted key findings about positive youth development from a study that I conducted with over 13,000 adolescents (Keith & Perkins, 1995). In addition, I will provide teaching strategies that I used to illuminate the concepts that underlie these findings. These strategies are not comprehensive but illustrate the approach I have used successfully with community and student audiences. It is possible to select portions of this outline and formulate new approaches.

FINDING

The greater the number of assets (protective factors) that a youth has, the less likely the youth is to be involved in risk behaviors.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A positive youth development orientation involves shifting attention away from concentrating on problems, and moving toward increasing young people's exposure to the positive and constructive activities that nurture healthy, responsible, and compassionate young people. Positive youth development is about both internal and external assets (see Tables 1 & 2). Internal assets are the commitment, values and competencies of the individual (e.g., educational aspirations, and social skills); external assets provide young people with interlocking systems of support, control (boundaries), and structure that comprise a supportive community

(e.g., having other adults as resources and having a supportive family).

Research has provided data demonstrating that assets are inversely related to risk behaviors (Benson, 1990; Bernard, 1991; Keith & Perkins, 1995; Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1990). Moreover, assets appear to be additive. Each increment of assets generally is accompanied by a reduction in the number of risk behaviors. Thus communities who want to decrease youth's involvement in risk behaviors will focus their efforts on increasing their youth's assets.

TEACHING STRATEGY: THE "POPSICLE MODEL" OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

This strategy uses kinesthetic, visual/spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences in addition to the verbal/linguistic and mathematical/logical.

Time Needed

One hour.

Objectives

1. Participants will understand positive youth development.
2. Participants will learn about the competencies and supports that are assets (protective factors) and the role that they play in youth development.
3. Participants will understand that assets are negatively (inversely) related to risk behaviors.
4. Participants will learn about the impact of assets when added together, that is, the cumulative nature of assets.

Materials

Four popsicle (craft) sticks per person.

Method

1. Have the participants break into small groups to answer the question "What is the difference between intervention, prevention, and youth development?" After ten minutes, bring the smaller groups back together and reach an overall, not specific, agreement on the definitions.

You may want to refer to the analogy presented below.

Analogy to explain youth development: In understanding positive youth development, it may be best to examine how positive youth development relates to two commonly used approaches: intervention and prevention. Intervention is defined as discontinuing or stopping an already exhibited illness (or a problem behavior). For instance, when an individual has the flu and he or she goes to the doctor to get medicine to help stop the illness from progressing, that is a medical intervention. Prevention, on the other hand, means to take advanced measures to keep something (e.g., youth participation in problem behaviors) from happening. An example of this is when a person goes to the doctor and has a flu shot, thus building up the immune system to keep from catching the flu. Positive youth development is a step beyond prevention. Positive youth development is a process by which youth's developmental needs are met, engagement in problem behaviors is prevented, and most importantly youth are empowered to build the competencies and skills necessary to be healthy contributing citizens now and as adults. In terms of a medical example, the individual takes an active role in his or her health by getting an immunization and by strengthening the body through physical exercise and dietary actions.

In your presentation, stress that positive youth development has a dual focus. First, positive youth development is about providing opportunities and positive relationships that help youth gain the skills and competencies they need to be successful. Second, this then prevents involvement in problem behavior and enhances a youth's ability to deal with life challenges and stresses.

2. Once the audience has a basic understanding of youth development, pass out four popsicle sticks to each participant. Explain to the participants that you will be presenting the competencies, assets, and external supports for which research has provided evidence of their *negative* association with risk behaviors and their *positive* association with positive youth development. Tell the participants to draw a face of a "typical" youth on the first stick. Explain to them that the face should represent their view of "typical" youth (e.g., smile, frown, bewildered).
3. Once they have drawn a face, you — the presenter, hold up a single popsicle stick saying "This is John/Susan, he/she is 14 years old." Then break the stick while simultaneously saying: "This is what can happen when a young person experiences multiple pressures or has to confront a challenging situation. However, young people who have developed certain skills and have other external supports are less likely to break under pressure." Then say: "Now I am going to present the six assets — three of these are external assets; that is, they are outside the individual's control. The other three assets are internal; that is, they are within the individual (e.g., competencies). Please be thinking about these assets not only in terms of how youth develop, but also in terms of how your community fosters and promotes these assets." (You may want to use Tables 1 and 2 as a handouts to be distributed at the end of the presentation.)
4. Start by describing the sample characteristics of the research that you drew on for the presentation (see *Appendix A* for references). The main purpose of presenting the sample characteristics is to provide creditability for the findings. Here, creditability is thought of in terms of the sample representativeness of both race/ethnicity and geographic location. If the data characteristics are not available, you should cite the researcher and his or her credentials. Where possible, you should employ local data in your presentations. (Sample Characteristics for the data I have presented are included in Table 3. However, when I make this presentation, I describe the characteristics instead of using an overhead because it is too much information.)
5. Now, describe the external assets. After you describe each asset have them write one asset on a popsicle stick. This will require three popsicle sticks, one asset on one side of each stick. Below is the basic outline of what assets to focus on and what to say. However, determining which asset to focus on is dependent on the particular research you cite and the audience you serve. After each asset or factor is stated, there are brief reasons for the factor's importance. Each section of the

outline contains a question that should be posed to the audiences about actions that need to be taken. Group solutions should be the focus of the discussion. During the discussion, you can list important points on newsprint or an overhead transparency.

State that, **“Youth who do well even though they are in very stressful environments have external assets like . . . ”**

- a. Close relationships with an adult (not necessarily a parent)

The person is a role model for the youth.

Youth have the opportunity to develop a sense of trust and a sense of security with someone older than they are.

Discussion question: How do we increase young people’s opportunity to interact with adults?

Ask the participants to take a new popsicle stick and write the words “close relationship with an adult.”

- b. Parental monitoring

Parents ask:

- Who** will you be with?
- What** will you be doing?
- Where** will you be?
- When** will you be home?

Parental monitoring demonstrates to youth that their parents are concerned about them. In addition, this enables the parents to stay in touch with their child’s life and friends.

Discussion question: How can we provide opportunities for parents to gain good parenting skills?

Ask the participants to take a new popsicle stick and write the words “parental monitoring.”

- c. Structured Time Use

Structured time use means involvement in extracurricular activities, such as band, sports,

and clubs or organizations in or out of school (e.g., 4-H, Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs.)

These activities provide opportunities for youth to succeed and to discover their individual talents.

Cooperative work and social skills development are major functions of extracurricular activities.

Discussion question: How can you encourage and support youth participation in extracurricular activities? What can the community do to support structured activities?

Ask the participants to take a new popsicle stick and write the words “structured time use.”

Youth who do well despite living in very stressful environments have internal assets like . . .

- d. Planning Skills

Youth know how to plan and make decisions.

Youth have an understanding of the consequences of their actions.

Discussion questions: How do we prepare our young people to plan but also be flexible? What things can adults and communities do?

Ask the participants to write the words “planning skills” on the other side of a popsicle stick.

- e. Social Skills

Youth is comfortable in various social settings. He or she knows the appropriate behavior and how to carry on a conversation. Youth knows how to negotiate, to compromise, and to come to a consensus.

Youth demonstrates the ability to initiate and maintain relationships, such as friendship.

Discussion Question: What types of opportunities would enable youth to test and

develop social skills? What things can adults and communities do?

Ask the participants to write the words “social skills” on the other side of a popsicle stick.

f. Problem-solving skills

Youth can develop creative solutions to problems.

Youth has developed both linear and nonlinear thought.

Discussion Question: How do we encourage the development of problem-solving skills? What things can adults and communities do?

Ask the participants to write the words “problem-solving skills” on the other side of a popsicle stick. (Now, you should have three popsicle sticks with three external assets written on one side of each them and three internal assets on the other side of each them.)

6. After going through the six assets, state again that youth development is about giving youth the opportunity to build their competencies and skills and providing a supportive environment for them to grow. Then while you are holding up a set of four popsicle sticks say, “Youth development is not about insulating, but about strengthening young people. It is a lot harder to break the popsicle sticks when there are several of them; certainly you can, but it would take a lot more pressure. This is also true for youth who have been given support and opportunities to develop their skills and competencies. These youth are more likely not to break under the pressure. These youth are more likely to make the healthy choice. (See Figures 1 and 2; this could be used as a visual aid with the audience.) You cannot totally protect young people from stress; eventually they will encounter it. Thus, it is better to prepare youth, by providing them opportunities to develop the competencies and skills necessary for successful adulthood.” (You may want to use Figure 1 and 2 as a handout.)

7. This past exercise and Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate that assets are cumulative and inversely related to involvement in risk behaviors. Thus the more assets, the less likely the youth is to participate in risk behaviors.

8. Finally, state that “Competence, in and of itself, is not enough — skill building is best achieved when young people are confident of their abilities and are called upon to use them in their communities. The development of confidence, commitment, caring, character, and connection are essential.”

CONCLUSIONS

This example demonstrates one way to present a few of the key concepts and findings from the positive youth development literature. The meaning and application of positive youth development is enhanced by presenting two or three key concepts or findings through multiple strategies such as visual images and metaphors. These strategies help engage the thinking and problem solving of the participants around applications to their own lives and community.

REFERENCES

- Benson, P. L. (1990). *The troubled journey: A portrait of 6th-12th grade youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.
- Bernard, B. (1991). *Fostering resiliency in kids: Protective factors in the family, school, and community*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Western Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities, Far West Laboratory.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind. The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Keith, J. G., & Perkins, D. F. (1995). *13,000 adolescents speak: A profile of Michigan youth*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for Children, Youth, and Families.

- Pittman, K. J. (1992). *Defining the fourth R: Promoting youth development*. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development, Center for Youth Development.
- Pittman, K. J., & Zeldin, S. (1994). From deterrence to development: Shifting the focus of youth programs for African-American males. In R. B. Mincy (Ed.), *Nurturing young black males: Challenges to agencies, programs, and social policy* (pp. 45-58). Washington DC: The Urban Institute.
- Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial resilience and protective factors. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57, 316-331.
- Takanishi, R. (1993). The opportunities of adolescence — research, interventions, and policy: Introduction to special issue. *American Psychologist*, 48, 85-87.
- Werner, E. (1990). Protective factors and individual resilience. In S. J. Meisels & J. P. Shonkoff (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (pp. 97-116). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix A: References related to positive youth development.

- Benson, P. L. (1993). *The troubled journey: A portrait of 6th-12th grade youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.
- Benard, B. (1991). *Fostering resiliency in kids: Protective factors in the family, school, and community*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Western Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities, Far West Laboratory.
- Blyth D. A., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (1992). *Healthy communities, healthy youth*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.
- Brento, L. K., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern, S. (1990). *Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for the future*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- Furstenberg, F. F., Jr. & Hughes, M. E. (1995). Social capital and successful development among at-risk youth. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 580-592.
- Garnezy, N. (1985). Stress-resistant children: The search for protective factors. In J. Stevens (Ed.), *Recent research in developmental psychopathology* (pp. 213-233). Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.
- Garnezy, N., Masten, A. S., & Tellegen, A. (1984). The study of stress and competence in children: A building block for developmental psychopathology. *Child Development*, 55, 97-111.
- Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., & Miller, J. Y. (1992). Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: Implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112, 64-105.
- Keith, J. G., & Perkins, D. F. (1995). *13,000 adolescents speak: A profile of Michigan youth*. East Lansing, MI: Institute for Children, Youth, and Families.
- Luster, T., & McAdoo, H. P. (1994). Factors related to the achievement and adjustment of young African American children. *Child Development*, 65, 1080-1094.
- Luster, T., & Small, S. A. (1994). Factors associated with sexual risk-taking behaviors among adolescents. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 622-632.
- Luthar, S. S. (1991). Vulnerability and resiliency: A study of high risk adolescents. *Child Development*, 62, 600-616.
- Luthar, S. S., & Zigler, E. (1991). Vulnerability and competence: A review of research on resilience in childhood. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61, 6-22.
- Mincy, R. B. (Ed) (1994). *Nurturing young black males: Challenges to agencies, programs, and social policy*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Pittman, K. J., & Zeldin, S. (1994). From deterrence to development: Shifting the focus of youth programs for African-American males. In R. B. Mincy (Ed.), *Nurturing young black males: Challenges to agencies, programs, and social policy* (pp. 45-58). Washington DC: The Urban Institute.

Previte, M. T. (1994). *Hungry ghosts: One woman's mission to change their world*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Powell-Cope, G. M., & Eggert, L. L. (1994). Psychosocial risk and protective factors: Potential high school dropouts versus typical youth. In R. C. Moss (Ed.), *Using what we know about at-risk youth: Lessons from the field* (pp.23-51). Lancaster, PA: Technomic.

Small, S. A., & Luster T. (1994). Adolescent sexual activity: An ecological, risk-factor approach. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 56, 181-192.

Rutter, M. (1985). Resilience in the face of adversity: Protective factors and resistance to psychiatric disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 147, 598-611.

Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial resilience and protective factors. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57, 316-331.

Rutter, M. (1989). Pathways from childhood to adult life. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 30, 23-51.

Werner, E. E. (1989). High-risk children in young adulthood: A longitudinal study from birth to 32 years. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 59, 72-81.

Werner, E. (1990). Protective factors and individual resilience. In S. J. Meisels & J. P. Shonkoff (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (pp. 97-116). New York: Cambridge University.

Werner, E. E. (1992). The children of Kauai: Resiliency and recovery in adolescence and adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 13, 262-268.

Werner, E., & Smith, R. (1982). *Vulnerable not invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Werner, E., & Smith, R. (1992). *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

Table 1. Definitions of the 16 External Assets

Asset Type	Asset Name	Asset Definition
SUPPORT	1. Family Support	Family life provides high levels of love and support
	2. Parent	Student views parent(s) as accessible resources for advice and support
	3. Parent communication	Student has frequent, in-depth conversations with parent(s)
	4. Other adult resources	Student has access to non-parent adults for advice and support
	5. Other adult communication	Student has frequent, in-depth conversation with non-parent adults
	6. Parent involvement in schooling	Parent(s) are involved in helping student succeed in school
	7. Positive school climate	School provides a caring, encouraging environment
CONTROL	8. Parental standards	Parent(s) have standards for appropriate conduct
	9. Parent discipline	Parent(s) discipline student when a rule is violated
	10. Parental monitoring	Parent(s) monitor “where I am going and with whom I will be”
	11. Time at home	Student goes out for “fun and recreation” three or fewer nights per week
	12. Positive peer influence	Student’s best friends model responsible behavior
STRUCTURED TIME USE	13. Involved in music	Student spends 1 hour or more per week in music training or practice
	14. Involved in school extracurricular activities	Student spends 1 hour or more per week in school sports, clubs, or organizations
	15. Involved in community organization or activities	Student spends 1 hour or more per week in organizations or clubs outside of school
	16. Involved in church or synagogue	Student spends 1 hour or more per week attending programs or services

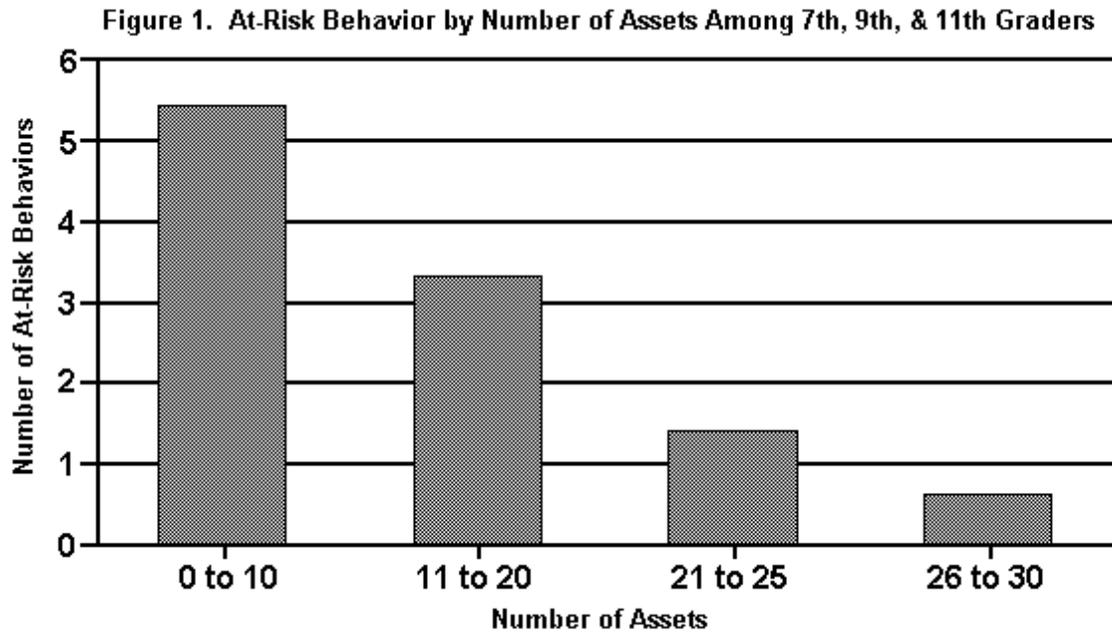
Table 2. Definitions of the 14 Internal Assets

Asset Type	Asset Name	Asset Definition
EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENT	1. Achievement motivation	Student is motivated to do well in school
	2. Educational aspiration	Student aspires to pursue post-high school education (e.g., trade school, college, vocational program)
	3. School performance	Student reports school performance is above average
	4. Homework	Student reports 6 hours or more of homework per week
POSITIVE VALUES	5. Values helping people	Student places high personal value on helping other people
	6. Is concerned about world hunger	Student reports interest in helping reduce world hunger
	7. Cares about people's feelings	Student cares about other people's feelings
	8. Values sexual restraint	Student values postponing sexual activity
SOCIAL COMPETENCE	9. Assertiveness skills	Student reports ability to "stand up for what I believe"
	10. Decision-making skills	Student reports "I am good at making decisions"
	11. Friendship-making skills	Student reports "I am good at making friends"
	12. Planning Skills	Student reports "I am good at planning ahead"
	13. Self-esteem	Student reports high self-esteem
	14. Positive view of personal future	Student is optimistic about his/her personal future

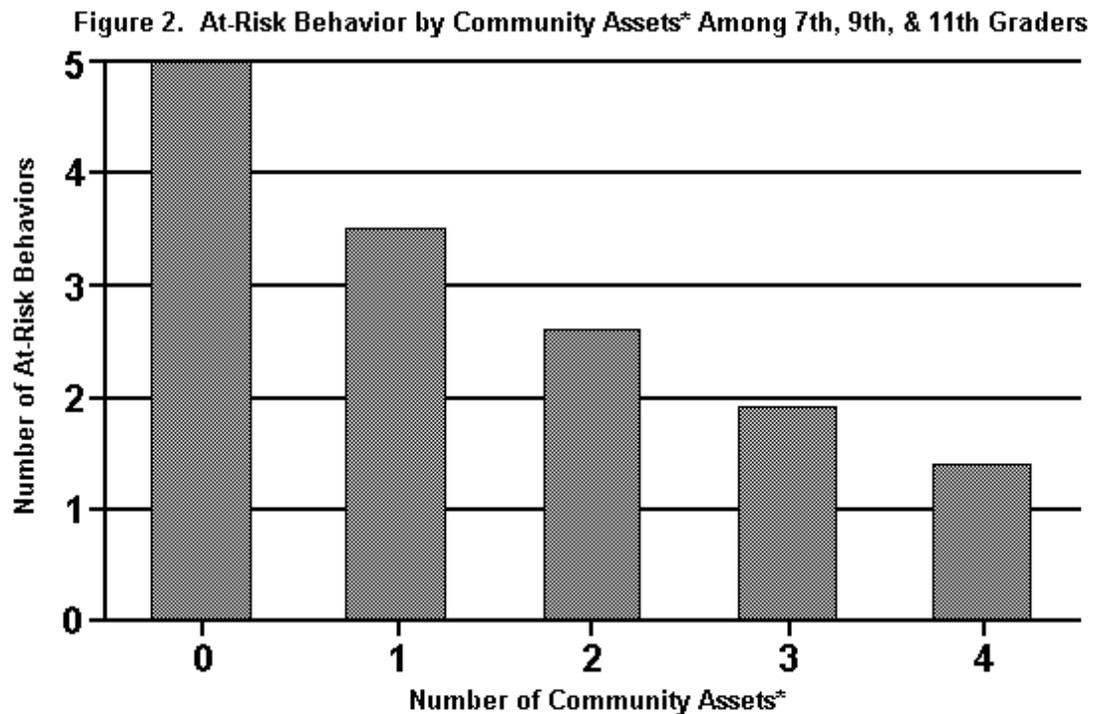
Table 3. Sample Characteristics from the 13,000 Adolescent Speak Study

	Sample Size	Percent of Total Sample
Total	13,532	100
Gender¹		
Male	6,412	47
Female	7,149	53
Race/Ethnicity¹		
Asian or Pacific Islander	137	1
African American	2,681	20
Euro-American	9,806	73
Hispanic	312	3
Native American	472	4
Grade¹		
Seventh (12-13 years old)	4,741	35
Ninth (14-15 years old)	5,140	38
Eleventh (16-17 years old)	3,651	27
Geographic Location¹		
Urban	5,137	38
Suburban	2,125	16
Rural	6,270	46

¹Note: May not sum to total of 100% due to missing data or rounding error. Adapted from Keith & Perkins (1995).



Source: Adapted from Keith & Perkins (1995)



*Four community assets: Involvement in extracurricular school activities; involvement in extracurricular community activities; involvement in church or synagogue; and positive school climate

Source: Adapted from Keith & Perkins (1995).