

STRENGTHS-BASED INTERVENTIONS

DESCRIPTION

Strengths-based interventions address and build on a youth's individual, family, and community strengths, assets, and resiliencies. Strengths-based interventions are a key aspect of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to youth development programming. *The following components comprise a positive youth development framework:*

- a) *Young people and families need to be viewed as both partners and clients of the system.*
- b) *Youth need to be given opportunities to participate meaningfully in the programs and services that will meet their developmental needs.*
- c) *Youth need opportunities to develop supportive and trusting relationships with adults.*
- d) *Adolescence is an important stage in the developmental process of young people and a valuable opportunity for communities to encourage youth to move in positive directions.*
- e) *Youth development is a natural and complex evolution.*

RATIONALE

It is essential that school mental health staff provide services that build on a youth's strengths or "assets." Studies reveal strong and consistent relationships between the number of assets present in young people's lives and the degree to which they develop in positive and healthful ways. The asset-building model holds promise for strengthening and encouraging students' resilience and protective factors with an emphasis on fostering healthy relationships, creating a positive school environment, and weaving protective factors into a full array of programs and practices. (See *Search Institute* link for more information on asset building)

A package of coordinated, collaborative strategies and programs is required in order to promote resiliency in students' communities. The following recommendations offer guidance to schools, school mental health providers, stakeholders, and collaborating community agencies on how to support a strengths-based perspective in school mental health.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Interventions with students

1. Include screening (see resources below) of resiliency factors in initial intake assessment, including:
 - Sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy
 - Ability to withstand obstacles or difficulty
 - Ability to see difficulty as a problem that can be addressed
 - Reasonable persistence
 - Capacity to develop range of strategies and skills to address the problem
2. Establish relationships with any community-based agencies or service providers working with the student in order to fortify linkages and facilitate integrative care.

Training

1. Promote the fact that school mental health services are "strengths-based" through outreach materials and presentations. Point out to teachers, students, and school staff that everybody has a role in promoting a healthy environment that focuses on student strengths.

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2. Offer school mental health providers [professional development](#), training, and supervision on how to incorporate strengths-based or asset-building approaches into their work with students. According to the *Search Institute*, such an approach could include:
 - Understanding how to create a supportive, strengths-based environment in the school.
 - Connecting to programs and practices that already support the asset model and are known by staff.
 - Understanding how asset building contributes to academic achievement.
 - Utilizing tools and resources to identify, assess, and build assets.
3. Offer workshops and opportunities for student skill building (e.g. conflict resolution, supporting a friend in crisis) so that young people can:
 - Be exposed to challenging and interesting experiences that help them build a wide array of skills.
 - Experience a sense of growth and progress.

Meaningful Youth/Adult Collaboration

1. Create opportunities for meaningful [student involvement](#) so that students can:
 - Be involved in meaningful roles with responsibility,
 - Have input into decision-making,
 - Have opportunities for leadership, and
 - Feel a sense of belonging.
2. Encourage supportive relationships among and between students and adults at school. Create and implement systems to assure that every student has at least one positive connection to an adult in the school.
3. Encourage teacher participation in student-led efforts to improve school climate.

School Climate

1. Focus on mental health vs. mental “illness”.
2. Be aware and respectful of students’ identities, both cultural and chosen.
3. Aim interventions at multiple domains—individual, environmental, and institutional.

Activities

1. Encourage student recognition of each other’s strengths in order to promote and model empathy-building practices. (Suggested activity: a monthly student recognition effort where a designated topic – such as peacekeeping, empathy, or justice -- is identified, and students are invited to submit anonymous nominations recognizing and describing that quality in a peer.)
2. Collaborate with students on creative projects that showcase student strengths in order to increase positive school climate and offer the school opportunities to get to know what's important to students. Suggested activities:
 - An “open mic” night
 - An arts showcase
 - A poetry salon.
3. Identify and coordinate student opportunities for community engagement. Opportunities may include:
 - Serving on a youth council
 - Apprenticeships or internships
 - Community service activities

REFERENCES

Galassi, Akos, Erlbaum (2007). Strengths-based school counseling; promoting student development and achievement, Reference and Research Book News

Koller, Svoboda (2002). The Application of a Strengths-Based Mental Health Approach in Schools, *Childhood Education*, Vol. 78

National Assembly on School Based Health Care (n.d.) *Enhancing Resilience and Protective Factors*. Retrieved from http://www.nasbhc.org/atf/cf/%7BCD9949F2-2761-42FB-BC7A-CEE165C701D9%7D/MH_resilience.pdf

RESOURCES

<http://cecp.air.org/interact/expertonline/strength/sba.asp>

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice (CECP). Provides articles and online discussion on strength-based assessments

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>

UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools. Website offers resources on school connectedness and school climate.

<http://outreach.msu.edu/bpbriefs/issues/brief2.pdf>

Best Practices Briefs - The Assets / Strength-based Approach to Programming: Promoting Positive Youth Development

<http://www.search-institute.org/assets/>

The Search Institute website offers information on asset building, including self-report checklists of 40 developmental assets that help to identify qualities in youth that can be enhanced to promote resiliency.

Henderson, N. and Milstein, M. (1996). *Resiliency in Schools: Making It Happen for Students and Educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.