

The Search Institute Series on  
Developmentally Attentive Community and Society

# WHAT DO CHILDREN NEED TO FLOURISH?

*Conceptualizing and Measuring  
Indicators of Positive Development*



EDITED BY

KRISTIN ANDERSON MOORE  
AND LAURA H. LIPPMAN

# What Do Children Need to Flourish?

## *Conceptualizing and Measuring Indicators of Positive Development*

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 Springer

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

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What do children need to flourish? : conceptualizing and measuring indicators of positive development / edited by Kristin A. Moore and Laura Lippman.

p. cm.

Papers presented at a conference held in Washington, D.C. in March 2003.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-387-23061-0

I. Child development--Evaluation--Congresses. I. Moore, Kristin A. II. Lippman, Laura.

HQ767.82.W43 2005

305.231--dc22

2004059116

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ISBN 0-387-23061-0 ISBN 13: 978-038-723061-0 Printed on acid-free paper.

© 2005 Springer Science+Business Media  
233 Spring Street, New York, New York 10013

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Printed in the United States of America. (TB/EB)

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 SPIN 150043

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# **What Do Children Need to Flourish?**

# The Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society

Series Editor

**Peter L. Benson**, *Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

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To advance interdisciplinary inquiry into the individual, system, community, and societal dynamics that promote developmental strengths; and the processes for mobilizing these dynamics on behalf of children and adolescents.

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## WHAT DO CHILDREN NEED TO FLOURISH?

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*This book is dedicated to our children*

*Lindsay*

*Eric*

*Brigit*

*and*

*Jonathan*

*May they flourish!*

# Preface

The Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society seeks to create a forum for leading scholars from many disciplines to introduce cutting-edge theories, models, and research on the nature of positive human development and the web of community and societal factors that contribute to that development. The goal is not only to advance scholarship but also to contribute to what Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000) call a “science for and of the people” (p. 11)—research that intentionally leads to improving the lives of individuals, families, communities, and society.

*What Do Children Need to Flourish?* exemplifies the vision for the series. Kristin Anderson Moore and Laura H. Lippman have drawn together leading scholars to examine how this nation might begin to build national indicator systems focused on optimal development—flourishing—that offers a complementary balance to the problem-focused indicators that currently shape public dialogue, policy, funding, and most research.

This volume attests to the explosion of interest and quality scholarship in positive development that has emerged in recent decades. Much of that research and practice has been exploratory. For example, since the early 1990s, Search Institute has been actively engaged in exploring what young people need in their lives in order to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible (see Lerner & Benson, 2003). Over time, hundreds of grassroots communities and thousands of organizations have begun efforts aimed at strengthening positive development. This positive focus will not reach its full potential impact, however, until it enters the systems of national indicators that guide funding, research, policy, and practice priorities and decisions.

Thus, articulating national indicators of positive development plays a vital role not only in advancing scientific inquiry but also in supporting the development of policies, practices, and public dialogue that view development through a new, positive lens. By introducing this balance to research, dialogue, and policy setting, this volume exemplifies what Earls (1999) calls a *critical* social science—neither solely positivist nor solely interpretative—in which “the science itself is part of an act of transforming society” (p. 521). We are honored that our colleagues at Child Trends have chosen to introduce this vital work through this series.

*Peter L. Benson, Ph.D.*

*Search Institute  
Series Editor*

## References

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- Lerner, R. M., & Benson, P. L. (Eds.). (2003). *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy, and practice*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
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# Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to thank the sponsors who not only provided the means for us to organize and convene a conference on indicators of positive development but also collaborated with us in varied ways across a period of years. Our sponsors, in alphabetical order, are:

Administration for Children and Families, DHHS  
Edna McConnell Clark Foundation  
Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics  
John Templeton Foundation  
MacArthur Network on Successful Pathways Through Middle Childhood  
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Family and Child Well-being Research Network  
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, DHHS

We would also like to acknowledge and thank our colleagues who helped organize the conference and bring this book to reality. Rosalind Johnson helped identify scholars, conceptualize the conference and book, and review draft papers. Jacquelynne Eccles provided essential help in identifying scholars who have studied education and achievement. Erik Michelsen also helped identify researchers and implement the conference. Julie Dombrowski helped to organize and then summarize the conference and to review paper revisions. Hugh McIntosh edited the papers from both a substantive and technical perspective. Mary Byers served as copy editor and prepress coordinator for the book on behalf of Search Institute.

Fanette Jones helped organize the conference logistics. The actual conference was greatly enhanced by the contributors of distinguished moderators and discussants, as well as presentations on related international work, including, in alphabetical order:

Duane Alexander  
Steve Blumberg  
Brett Brown  
Sonia Chessen  
James Connell  
Pat Fagan  
Dan Hart  
David Johnson  
Corey Keyes  
Mariann Lemke

Dan Lichter  
David Murphy  
Mairead Reidy  
Jodie Roth  
Laura Salganik  
Shephard Smith  
Judith Torney-Purta  
Katherine Wallman  
Harry Wilson

We are also delighted that Peter L. Benson, director of Search Institute, participated as a contributor and, with his colleague, Eugene C. Roehlkepertain, suggested and supported turning the conference papers into a book as a part of the Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society.

Finally, we would like to thank the authors of these excellent papers, who traveled to Washington, D.C., at a time when tensions due to terrorism and war were high. We share our thanks and appreciation to all of them for joining in a critical effort to examine rigorously how to conceptualize and measure the attributes that we seek in our children to help all young people flourish.

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# 1 Introduction and Conceptual Framework

**Kristin Anderson Moore and Laura H. Lippman**

*Child Trends*

*Flourishing* is a strong word. It is a word with wonderful, happy, and healthy connotations, but it is still a strong word. It means something to say that we don't just want children not to use drugs or commit crimes. We don't just want children to avoid becoming dropouts and teen parents. We want children to flourish. But what does this mean?

Are children who flourish healthy, strong, and athletic? Are they children who sing and laugh? Are they children who are kind and empathic? Who are close to their parents? Who serve their communities? Who love learning and who do well in school?

And who decides what it means to be a flourishing child? Is it a matter of values? Is it a determination for economists or politicians to make? Is it a construct that adults should define? Keyes (2003, p. 294) has defined flourishing as "a state in which an individual feels positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially." Certainly this gets at the sense of flourishing, but we apply the term here to all domains of a child's life, including education and health, as well as social and emotional outcomes. Another concern that is frequently raised is whether flourishing can be measured. Are positive traits, attitudes, and behaviors too "soft" to be measured with precision and rigor? Is it possible that although we all think we can recognize a child who is flourishing, we cannot agree on the specifics?

We undertook this project because we thought it was time to become serious and concrete about conceptualizing and measuring positive indicators for children. Our scans indicated few measures of positive outcomes in reports on child well-being or in national surveys (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2003; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002; Zaff, 2000). Believing that "what gets measured gets emphasized, and what gets emphasized gets measured," as stated by Arthur Schwartz, vice president for

Research and Programs in the Human Sciences at the John Templeton Foundation in his opening remarks to the conference from which this collection came, we felt it was time to cast our nets broadly and see what had been done or what could be done. Our goal was to provide strong measures of positive attributes that could be assessed and monitored at the national level. We also imagined, however, that a coherent set of positive measures would be an important addition to longitudinal research studies and that such measures would be useful to program providers conducting evaluations.

For any of these purposes, it is crucial to identify measures that are psychometrically solid. Moreover, they need to be meaningful, in a diverse national population, to children from varied social, cultural, and economic groups. In addition, it is important to consider whether and how positive indicators matter. Some want assurance that positive characteristics in children translate into higher earnings, self-sufficiency, family responsibility, and good citizenship in adulthood. Others are satisfied to be assured that children are happy and flourishing while they are children. This distinction is sometimes referred to as the debate between *well-being* and *well-becoming*. Feeling that both well-being and well-becoming are important criteria, we sought to examine whether constructs and measures predict to both contemporaneous outcomes and to outcomes in the future.

## Background

An interest in positive development has characterized programs for many years. Preschool education programs, Scouts, service-learning, child-care teachers, school clubs, religious programs, and sports teams have often focused on teaching positive values, skills, and habits. The research community (with some important exceptions), on the other hand, was slower to focus on positive outcomes. This pattern may reflect the greater funding available for studies of problem behaviors from government agencies and foundations. However, a focus on positive behaviors and outcomes has gradually evolved, for a variety of reasons. One factor was undoubtedly the demand for such measures from programs and funders who support youth development and other positive development programs. If the goal of the program was to produce a positive outcome, then a positive outcome measure was needed to assess program success. Similar needs were experienced by state policy makers designing evaluations to study welfare reform and children. Policy makers wanted positive as well as negative outcomes to be examined.

Another factor was the gradual recognition that a focus on the negative is scientifically unbalanced and incomplete. In addition, as indicator reports such as *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-being*, produced by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2003), and the *Kids Count Data Book*, produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2003), became widely disseminated, the dearth of positive measures was noted by those producing and reading the reports. Given evidence that the public perceives the state of America's

children to be worse than it really is (Guzman, Lippman, Moore, & O'Hare, 2003; Public Agenda, 1999), some raised the possibility that the focus on negative outcomes distorts the public's perception of how America's children are faring.

Another factor is the need to adapt to social change. Over the past century, modern industrial nations, including the United States, have met and responded to a wide range of threats to child health and survival. Infant mortality, for example, declined dramatically over the past century, and important improvements have occurred in the health, education, housing, and economic security of children. This is not to say that problems do not remain or that disparities do not exist, but rather that large and important improvements have occurred. With these improvements, a focus on quality-of-life issues has become more central, and such a perspective is very complementary to a focus on positive outcomes (Ben-Arieh, 1997).

Thus, for numerous reasons, researchers in various fields were coming to a common conclusion: There is a need to conceptualize and measure positive development for children and youth. However, Child Trends' review of available national databases found relatively few that included positive measures, beyond the standard measures of educational achievement and attainment, which were quite limited compared with the set of possible positive measures that could be conceptualized. Before moving ahead to develop such measures, it made sense to see what the scholarly community might have developed. Fortunately, we were able to identify a number of high-quality local and regional studies as well as some national surveys that have incorporated aspects of positive development.

To jump-start the development of positive measures, a conference was held in Washington, D.C., in March 2003, to bring together scholars working on varied aspects of positive development to share their work. Authors were commissioned to provide a literature review conceptualizing their construct and summarizing research to date and to provide information on data quality for their proposed measure. Since contributors were working with existing data in all but one case, it was not always possible for them to conduct all of the requested psychometric analyses; they were asked to assess the amount of missing data, the distribution of responses, the reliability of their measure(s), and both the concurrent and prospective validity of their measures to examine well-being and well-becoming. In addition, where possible, authors were asked to conduct analyses for major subgroups, including age, gender, race and Hispanic origin, and disability status.

## Summaries of the Papers

Papers presented at the conference and included in this book cover a wide range of constructs. Part I addresses the positive formation of the self, including character, attitudes, spirituality, and identity.

Nansook Park and Christopher Peterson explore the assessment of character strengths, which builds on the Values in Action Inventory of Character Strengths



for Youth. They argue that a strength should be visible in a person's thoughts, words, or actions; contribute to the good life for the self and for others, yet be valued in and of itself even if it does not produce clear benefits; not "diminish other people" but rather inspire or support them; and be cultivated by the larger society and recognized by a societal consensus regarding its importance. In addition, it should not be possible to decompose a strength into component elements. Park and Peterson also share initial conceptual and measurement work on character strengths.

Peter L. Benson, Peter C. Scales, Arturo Sesma Jr., and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain explore indicators of adolescent spirituality. They note that two commonly used measures—attendance and salience or importance—have repeatedly been found to be associated with better development and behavior among children. The explanatory power of these measures is modest, however, and Benson and his colleagues argue that it is necessary to move beyond these fairly superficial markers to explore a richer set of beliefs, values, behaviors, and community aspects of religion and spirituality. Also, they note that American culture has become increasingly diverse, and new measures are needed to capture aspects of spirituality in varied cultural and social groups. They further distinguish between "vertical" and "horizontal" themes, that is, a focus on a Supreme Being, life force, or spirit and a focus on the effect of religious or spiritual beliefs in moving adherents toward involvement with others in this world.

E. Scott Huebner, Shannon M. Suldo, and Robert F. Valois examine two brief measures of children's life satisfaction. Using these measures, children make judgments about whether they are satisfied with their lives, which is one aspect of positive mental health. One scale measures global life satisfaction, and the other examines specific domains of life satisfaction; both scales have been successfully fielded. The scales have very good internal reliability and discriminate and construct validity. The authors found that children who were more satisfied with their lives had very low levels of depression and anxiety, very positive self-concepts, and good family relationships.

C. R. Snyder presents the Children's Hope Scale (CHS). Snyder conceptualizes hope in children as an overall perception that one's goals can be met and that one has the capacity to find routes to goals (pathways thinking) and the motivation or sense of agency to pursue goals (agency thinking). Scores on the CHS have been found to correlate with perceived competency and control and to predict cognitive achievement. Also, the scale is inversely correlated with childhood depression and loneliness. The CHS has been tested on many different samples of children, some with life-threatening illnesses (e.g., cancer) as well as other disabilities for whom hope is a critical asset. Differences by gender and family income have not been found, but Snyder notes that additional research is needed to explore differences by race/ethnicity.

Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor shares work on an evolving scale of ethnic identity. She distinguishes the processes of building an ethnic identity, including exploration, resolution, and affirmation as distinct components. Evidence from diverse samples provides support for construct validity and indicates that individuals can, as hypothesized, be described as having four identity statuses: