

## Toward Quality and Equality

### *Fulfilling Our Promises to America's Children and Youth*

#### DISPLAY 1

#### The Five Promises: Vision Statements

America's Promise—The Alliance for Youth has identified and promoted these five Promises since its founding in 1997:

**Caring Adults**—Every child and youth needs and deserves support and guidance from caring adults in their families, schools, and communities, including ongoing, secure relationships with parents and other family adults, as well as multiple and consistent formal and informal positive relationships with teachers, mentors, coaches, youth volunteers, and neighbors.

**Safe Places and Constructive Use of Time**—Every child and youth needs and deserves to be physically and emotionally safe everywhere they are—from the actual places of families, schools, neighborhoods and communities to the virtual places of media—and to have an appropriate balance of structured, supervised activities and unstructured, unscheduled time.

**A Healthy Start and Healthy Development**—Every child and youth needs and deserves the healthy bodies, healthy minds, and healthful habits and choices resulting from regular well-child/youth health care and needed treatment, good nutrition and exercise, comprehensive health knowledge and skills, and role models of physical and psychological health.

**Effective Education for Marketable Skills and Lifelong Learning**—Every child and youth needs and deserves the intellectual development, motivation, and personal, social-emotional, and cultural skills needed for successful work and lifelong learning in a diverse nation, as a result of having quality learning environments, challenging expectations, and consistent formal and informal guidance and mentoring.

**Opportunities to Make a Difference through Helping Others**—Every child and youth needs and deserves the chance to make a difference—in their families, schools, communities, nation, and world—through having models of caring behavior, awareness of the needs of others, a sense of personal responsibility to contribute to larger society, and opportunities for volunteering, leadership, and service.

AMERICA IS BREAKING ITS PROMISES to its children and youth. Millions of young people ages 6 to 17 experience very few, if any, of the five Promises that children and youth from birth to age 21 need to build their character and competence (Display 1).

That's the inevitable conclusion of the National Promises Study in a new report titled *Every Child, Every Promise: A Report on Our Nation's Young People* from America's Promise—The Alliance for Youth in collaboration with Search Institute and Child Trends. That gap sets them up for higher levels of negative outcomes, including violence and poor academic achievement. Adding to the challenge, African American and Hispanic young people are more likely than white children to experience few or no Promises.

At the same time, demographics are not destiny. The report also reveals that millions of young people from all backgrounds and in all circumstances can experience the Promises. So it is possible, over time, for this society to deliver the Promises to *all* of America's children and youth.

Raising the level of the Promises among all young people—promoting *developmental quality*—and making the experience of the Promises more equal across groups—promoting *developmental equality*—are noble and necessary goals that can strengthen individual young people, their families, their communities, and civil society now and in the future.

## The National Promises Study

Since its founding in 1997, America's Promise—The Alliance for Youth has joined the national effort to ensure that all of America's young people develop to their fullest potential. As its vision, America's Promise has articulated five Promises that children and youth from birth to age 21 need to build their character and competence, both in their present and future:

- Caring Adults
- Safe Places and Constructive Use of Time
- A Healthy Start and Healthy Development
- Effective Education for Marketable Skills and Lifelong Learning
- Opportunities to Make a Difference through Helping Others

A wealth of research and practice support shows the power of these resources as positive influences in young people's lives and, as important, demonstrates that contexts can be changed to ensure that more young people experience those resources.<sup>1</sup> The Promises are also consistent with Search Institute's framework of Developmental Assets, or building blocks of healthy development.

## Background on the Study

The America's Promise report, *Every Child, Every Promise*, provides the first in-depth examination of the state of these five Promises for ages 6–11 and 12–17. A core part of this study is the National Promises Study, which consists of a series of national polls conducted by the Gallup

Organization and designed by Search Institute and Child Trends. This article focuses on this study. Together with existing national data, it provides a portrait of the extent to which children and youth ages 6–11 and 12–17 experience the Promises.

The *Every Child, Every Promise* report (Display 2) also summarizes findings from two other studies that echo and extend the National Promises Study:

- The Voices Study conducted by Just Kid, Inc., shows that substantial proportions of young people themselves are pessimistic about their chances for a successful life and desperately want the five Promises.
- An economic analysis by Nobel Laureate James Heckman of the University of Chicago demonstrates vividly that investing in children and youth so that they experience the kind of developmental positives embodied in both Developmental Assets and Five Promises frameworks throughout the first two decades of life—not just in one age period—substantially increases young people's chances of enjoying academic success, physical, psychological, and social health, and civic engagement.

An extensive process was undertaken in the National Promises Study to develop quality, age-appropriate measures for each Promise for each age group (0–5, 6–11, 12–17, and 18–21), with deeper focus on ages 6–11 and 12–17.<sup>2</sup> Since we want young people to experience the Promises to positively influence their developmental outcomes, we also measured a number of key outcomes, such as overall health, substance avoidance, safe sexual behavior (for 12- to 17-year-olds), social competence, thriving, school grades, and frequency of volunteering.

These indicators<sup>3</sup> became the basis of three 15-minute telephone surveys by the Gallup Organization during fall 2005 of nationally representative samples of adolescents ages 12–17, the parents of those adolescents (i.e., matched pairs of an adolescent and one of her or his parents), and the parents of children ages 6–11. African American and Hispanic households were oversampled to ensure adequate numbers for analysis, and the final samples were weighted to account for the oversampling and to match

### DISPLAY 2

## The America's Promise November 2006 Report to the Nation

The America's Promise November 2006 report to the nation, *Every Child, Every Promise: A Report on Our Nation's Young People*, is available at [www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org). The report summarizes the findings from the Search Institute/Child Trends National Promises Study (the focus of this article), as well as findings of the Voices Study by Just Kid, Inc., in which more than 4,000 young people describe in their own words what America can do to support them, and an economic analysis of the value of investments in positive child and youth development through the first two decades of life by University of Chicago Nobel Laureate James Heckman and associates. The detailed report on the National Promises Study itself—*Keeping Our Promises to America's Children and Youth*—is available from either [www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org) or [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org).

TABLE 1

**Proportion of 6- to 17-Year-Olds with Promises and Indicators\***

PROMISE	% with Promise and Indicators		INDICATORS
	Teen	Pre-Teen	
<b>Caring Adults</b>	<b>76%</b> 67% 72% 81% 83% 9%	<b>90%</b> 81% 88% 91% 92% 7%	Caring relationships with parents/primary caregivers Caring relationships with extended family adults Caring relationships with adults at school Caring relationships with adults in the neighborhood/community, including: • formal mentors in school- and community-based settings
<b>Safe Places and Constructive Use of Time</b>	<b>42%</b> 89% 65% 65% 73% – 77% 42%	<b>31%</b> 92% 72% 44% 74% 70% 67% 41%	Safe family Parental monitoring Safe school Safe neighborhood/community Safe outdoor play spaces (6–11) Opportunity for involvement in high-quality structured activities Frequently participates in high-quality structured activities
<b>A Healthy Start and Healthy Development</b>	<b>36%</b> 66% 55% 73% 53% 60% 51% 50% 77%	<b>49%</b> 77% 53% – 74% – 60% – 74%	Regular checkups and health insurance Good nutrition Daily physical activity (12–17) Recommended amount of restful sleep Health education classes with comprehensive content (12–17) Positive adult role models Peer influence (12–17) Emotional safety
<b>Effective Education for Marketable Skills and Lifelong Learning</b>	<b>39%</b> 81% 44% 81% 43% 61% 66% 62% 74% 71%	<b>79%</b> – 66% 91% 82% – – 80% – –	Positive school climate (12–17) School culture emphasizes academic achievement Learning to use technology effectively Youth/child reading for pleasure Friends value being a good student (12–17) School perceived as relevant and motivating (12–17) Parents actively involved with child's education Adult sources of guidance about schooling and careers (12–17) Opportunities to learn social/emotional skills (12–17)
<b>Opportunities to Make a Difference through Helping Others</b>	<b>53%</b> 65% 83% 61% 62% 80%	<b>55%</b> 67% – 58% 51% 85%	Adult models of volunteering, including parents Peer models of volunteering (12–17) Parent civic engagement Family conversations about current events Youth given useful roles in schools and communities
* These indicators were developed in 2005–2006 by Search Institute and Child Trends. Pre-teens are ages 6–11; teens are ages 12–17.			

census data. Each of the three samples included interviews with more than 2,000 teenagers or parents, for a total of more than 6,000 interviews.<sup>4</sup>

### **Finding #1: Promises Partially Fulfilled**

The good news is that most young people ages 6–17 experience at least some *pieces* of the vision of America’s Promise. As Table 1 shows, most American youth experience most of the *individual* indicators. Indeed, more than half of 12- to 17-year-olds experience almost nine out of ten (28 of 32) of the indicators. Similarly, more than half of children ages 6–11 experience almost nine out of ten (22 of 25) of the indicators for their age group.

### **Finding #2: Promises Fulfilled for a Minority of Young People**

To reach the level of a fulfilled Promise, however, youth (or parents) had to report that young

people experienced about 75% of the multiple indicators within each Promise. (See Display 3 for the rationale for this criterion.) We propose that the Promises are met when young people experience at least four of the five Promises.

By these standards, *few young people fully experience the Promises*. In fact, only one in four adolescents (25%) experience four or all five of the Promises, and only about one in three children ages 6–11 (37%) experience four or all five Promises (Figure 1). Thus, this nation has fulfilled its Promises to only a minority of its children and youth. The Promises have not been fulfilled (because young people experience none or one of the five Promises) for 30% of 12- to 17-year-olds and 13% of 6- to 11-year-olds. In the middle, Promises have been partially fulfilled (two to three Promises) for 45% of the 12- to 17-year-olds and 50% of the 6- to 11-year-olds.

When we convert percentages to numbers of young people, we find the following:

- Of the approximately 49 million children and youth in the United States ages 6–17, more than 10 million are not even partially experiencing the Promises.
- Another 11 million adolescents and 12 million preadolescents are only experiencing two to three of the Promises.

Not surprisingly, different groups of children and teenagers do not have equal access to the Promises. Across the age spectrum, girls are somewhat more likely to experience the Promises (that is, to have four or all five Promises). Among teenagers, 12- to 14-year-olds are somewhat more likely than 15- to 17-year-olds to experience the Promises.

But differences by race/ethnicity, income, and parental education are even more striking. Non-Hispanic White children and youth are much more likely to experience the Promises than are Hispanic or African American young people. As income and mother’s education rise, so does the likelihood of young people having four or all five Promises. Some of the cell sizes in these analyses are less than 100, and so these findings on group differences should be viewed with caution, but the consistency of these patterns is notable. Further study is needed to confirm these results.

#### **DISPLAY 3**

### **Setting a High Standard**

For young people to be said to experience a fulfilled Promise, youth (or parents) had to report that young people experienced about 75% of the multiple indicators within each Promise. Why did we set this relatively high criterion?

First, the vision statements for each Promise describe not merely adequate environments, but developmentally good and even optimal ones. They reflect *aspirations* or our best hopes for our young people that may require some “stretch.”

Second, Search Institute research on the 40 Developmental Assets (constructs that describe positive experiences similar to the indicators of the Promises) has suggested that young people who experience 31 of the 40 assets (i.e., about 75%) are significantly different from other young people on a host of positive developmental outcomes, from avoiding risky behaviors such as violence and substance use to doing well at school and helping others.<sup>5</sup> So we predicted that a similar level of attaining the Promises likely would be meaningful in distinguishing young people doing more and less well on positive developmental outcomes.

And third, we wanted to ensure that the high standard of the America’s Promise vision was maintained, while at the same time acknowledging that young people can take different pathways to reaching positive developmental outcomes. An option would have been to make it easier to “have” an indicator, but require young people to experience *all* of the indicators in order to have a Promise. Instead, by setting the bar at about 75%, young people could “have” a Promise by meeting different combinations of the indicators of that Promise, as long as they added up to about 75% of the indicators. In this way, we tried to balance the vision of positive development with a respect for the diversity of ways positive development actually happens.

### Finding #3: Some Promises Fulfilled Better than Others

As might be expected, young people do better with some Promises than with others (Figure 2). The majority of American children and youth seem to have Caring Adults in their lives and Opportunities to Make a Difference through Helping Others. Yet even on these Promises, there is significant room for improvement: Nearly one in four young people ages 12–17 do not experience enough Caring Adults, and among both teens and preteens, nearly half do not have enough Opportunities to Make a Difference.

In addition, less than half of adolescents report both being safe throughout their environments and participating several hours a week or more in high-quality, structured activities such as after-school programs. Parents of 6- to 11-year-olds report even lower levels of safe places and high-quality structured activities for their younger children. This difference in meeting the Safe Places and Constructive Use of Time Promise between teens and preteens occurs largely because parents perceive their younger children being bullied at school more often than teenagers say they are bullied at school.

A little less than 40% of adolescents say they are experiencing enough of the elements we measured of either Effective Education or a Healthy Start and Healthy Development to be counted as experiencing those two Promises. Preteens appear to be doing better on those two Promises (although the differences in Effective Education may be due mostly to differences in how the Promise was measured in the two age groups). Even so, according to their parents' responses, about half of 6- to 11-year-olds are not experiencing the Healthy Start Promise.

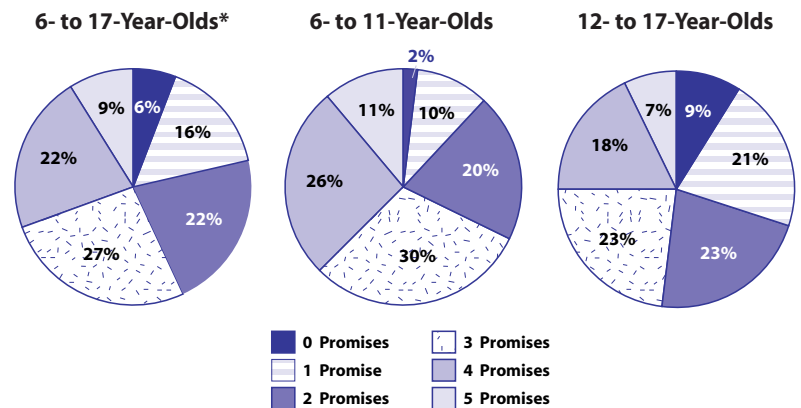
### Finding #4: A Slight Majority of Young People Have Positive Outcomes

Overall, the data from this study parallel previous research that shows that a majority (though often a slim majority) of young people ages 6–17 seem to be doing relatively well on most indicators of positive developmental outcomes. For example:

- About 80% rate their overall health as “good” or “excellent.”

FIGURE 1

### Number of Promises Young People Experience



\*Percentages for 6- to 17-year-olds are means of percentages for 12- to 17-year-olds and 6- to 11-year-olds.

- About 80% of 12- to 17-year-olds say they “often” or “very often” feel a sense of purpose. (The question was not asked for ages 6–11.)
- About 63% say they are socially competent (mostly generous, respectful, concerned about others’ feelings, and good at resolving conflicts peacefully).
- About 52% say they are “thriving” (i.e., that they have a special talent or interest that gives them joy and energy, and have at least three adults who help them nurture and develop that interest).
- About 45% report getting mostly As in school.

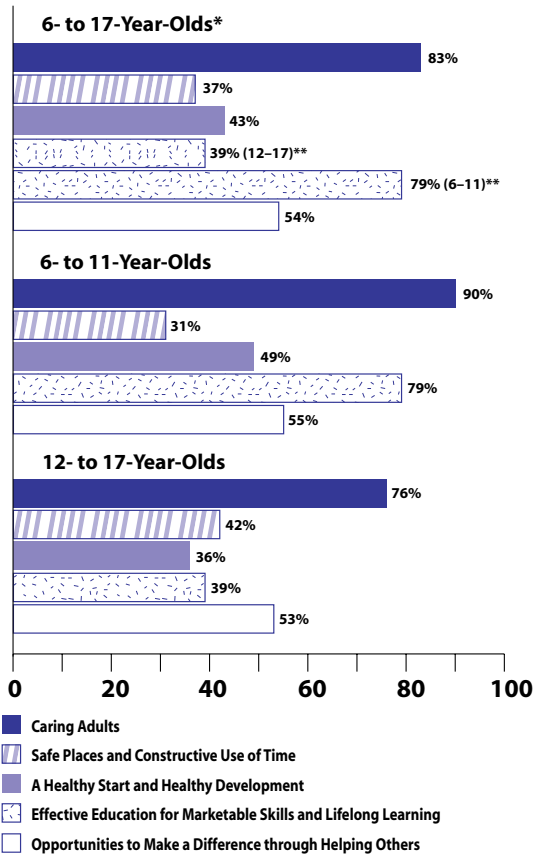
However, a quite substantial minority of young people (roughly 25%–45%, depending on the indicator) are not achieving these positive developmental outcomes. Thus, if this society seeks these kinds of outcomes for our young people, then we need to develop strategies that will move more young people toward these positive goals.

### Finding #5: The Power of the Promises

One important strategy for improving the outcomes for young people is to redouble efforts to meet the five Promises. Indeed, as shown in Table 2, Young people experiencing more Promises are more likely to have positive outcomes.<sup>6</sup> This relationship is evident among both 12- to 17-year-olds and 6- to 11-year-olds, with

FIGURE 2

## U.S. Young People Experiencing Individual Promises



\* Percentages for 6- to 17-year-olds are means of percentages for 12- to 17-year-olds and 6- to 11-year-olds.

\*\* Age-relevant differences in how Effective Education was calculated may account for most of the disparity between percentages for 12- to 17-year-olds and 6- to 11-year-olds on this Promise. Age-relevant differences make the mean for combined 6-17 less valid an estimate than for the other Promises.

previous longitudinal research, it is reasonable to hypothesize that these five Promises are a key part of a positive foundation for young people's healthy development and life outcomes.

### Finding #6: The Challenge of Equality

Young people in different demographic groups are not equally likely to experience the Promises. In general, girls report having more Promises than boys, 6- to 8-year-olds more than 9- to 11-year-olds, and 12- to 14-year-olds more than 15- to 17-year-olds. Non-Hispanic White youth have more than Hispanic or African American youth. And young people from families with more income and more education have

the relation appearing stronger among teenagers than among younger children. These differences are highly statistically significant for most outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that these results are quite consistent with the vast scientific literature that links positive developmental experiences to better subsequent child and adolescent well-being. However, readers of this study cannot infer a cause-and-effect relationship between the Promises and the developmental outcomes because we did not follow these young people over time. Nonetheless, given consistencies with

more Promises than those from less affluent and less highly educated families.

In addition, young people in different demographic groups are not equally likely to have positive developmental outcomes. Although more varied and therefore less easily summarized than the distribution of Promises, positive developmental outcomes from violence avoidance to life satisfaction seem to be reported more often among the following groups of young people:

- Girls;
- Younger children in each of the 6-11 and 12-17 age groups;
- Non-Hispanic Whites;
- Young people from families making more than \$50,000 a year and, especially, those making more than \$100,000; and
- Young people whose mothers graduated from college.

Thus, America's young people do not have equal access to the five Promises, and they do not experience positive developmental outcomes at the same levels. As stated earlier, however, demographics are not destiny. When young people in different demographic groups experience four or all five Promises, most demographic differences in positive outcomes either shrink or disappear. In general, children and youth who experience four or all five of the Promises are more alike than different in their outcomes. Especially for teenagers, experiencing these Promises is more strongly related to most outcomes than are demographics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, or family income or education. For example, Figure 3 shows that differences in "thriving" across income groups are essentially eliminated among those who report having four or all five Promises. (Thriving was defined in this study as young people having a special interest or talent plus at least three adults who help nurture and develop that interest.)

The five Promises and other similar targets for positive development may well represent an important resource for addressing the serious inequalities among children and adolescents in this society. Although the correlational nature of the study does not allow for bold claims, it does suggest that providing the basic resources to all young people across demographic groups may

TABLE 2

## The Power of Promises for Positive Outcomes

Percentages of Young People Reporting Each Outcome,  
by Number of Promises Experienced\*

	Outcomes	Promises Not Experienced (0–1 Promises)	Promises Partially Experienced (2–3 Promises)	Promises Experienced (4–5 Promises)
<b>6- to 11-Year-Olds</b>	Overall health	77%	89%	95%
	Social competence	36%	56%	73%
	Thriving	35%	55%	68%
	School grades	36%	52%	63%
<b>12- to 17-Year-Olds</b>	Overall health	60%	74%	87%
	A sense of purpose	69%	84%	91%
	Social competence	50%	70%	81%
	Thriving	30%	50%	63%
	School grades	22%	33%	56%

\*12- to 17-year-olds answered for themselves. Data for 6- to 11-year-olds come from their parents' responses.

be one important strategy for reducing the disparities that young people experience based on their individual, family, and community differences.

While demographic differences will always demand shaping responses to fit individual circumstances, providing equal access to the five Promises may help lead to more positive outcomes for young people from all backgrounds. All groups of young people need to experience more of all the Promises. At the same time, there is much work to be done to reduce and eventually eliminate the “Promises gaps” that seem to be present by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and family income and education levels.

### Limitations of the Study

As with all studies, our findings can be legitimately critiqued because of limitations in our design and measurement. Critiques are warranted based on issues such as the sampling, measurement, and analysis, about whose merits different observers might disagree. But the patterns of the responses of these 6,000 adolescents and parents of 6- to 11-year-olds and 12- to 17-year-olds were internally consistent, strengthening the impression that the responses were truthful and reliable.

Adding to our confidence in this study is that the portrait it conveys resonates well with what

a considerable body of scientific research has suggested is the case, including key research by Search Institute, the National Research Council, the Social Development Research Group, Child Trends, the Forum for Youth Investment, and others. Deeper analyses of these data are needed, and future replications of this study, as well as, ideally, longitudinal studies that more causally link the Promises to outcomes, can provide trend data to help gauge progress in addressing these key findings.

In the end, our polling data may in fact paint a *rosier* picture than is actually the case. This may be due in part to our not having been able to measure the Promises very deeply in a telephone poll, and in part because our scoring criteria were for the most part relatively generous while still attempting to reflect with integrity the vision put forth by America's Promise. But we believe that when any debate about methodology is over, the core findings will hold true.

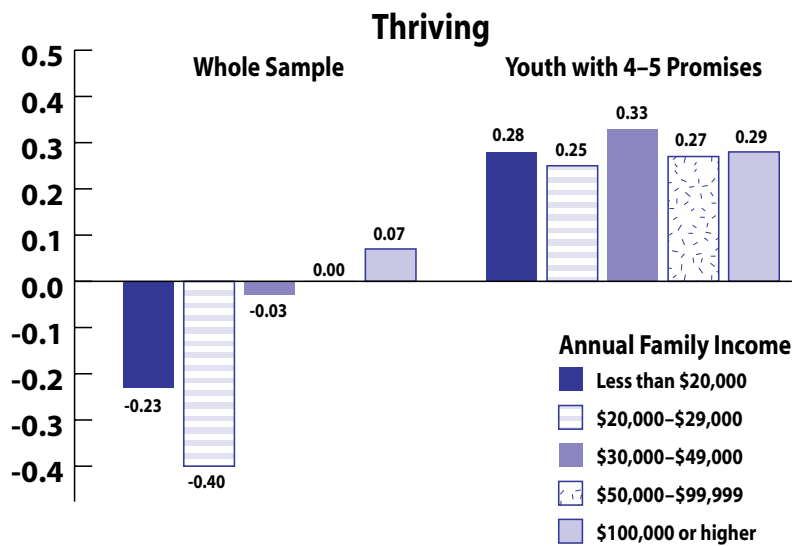
### Implications for Policy and Dialogue

In the wake of a significant national election, the National Promises Study (together with the other studies discussed in the America's Promise report, *Every Child, Every Promise*) offers a new opportunity for dialogue about how this nation cares for its children and youth. In some ways, the report refreshes and gives new impetus to a

FIGURE 3

### Impact of Promises Experienced on Reducing Standardized Mean Income Level Differences in Thriving among 12- to 17-Year-Olds

This figure shows that in the whole sample, which includes young people with no Promises and young people with all of them, the mean scores for “thriving” get higher as family income gets higher—the trend line generally slopes sharply upward going from left (lower incomes) to right (higher incomes). In contrast, among youth who have 4-5 Promises, regardless of their income, thriving is practically equal across income—the trend line is almost completely flat, showing that having 4-5 Promises erases the differences in thriving based on family income.



number of previous studies on young people’s healthy development.

**Attend to both children and adolescents—**Unlike many reports, the National Promises Study includes both children (ages 6–11) and adolescents (ages 12–17). In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of attending to young people’s development across the first two decades of life. It is likely (though not confirmable through this study) that the Promises fulfilled with younger children prepare them to engage in each of the Promises during adolescence. Yet the declines in Promises across both age groups remind us that the early experiences of Promises are no guarantee that young people will stay engaged and connected. As a society, we must attend to young people at each and every stage of their development. Putting all the focus on any specific age group is inadequate.

**Draw on a growing knowledge base—**An important opportunity lies in the growing body

of research and best-practice experience about *how* to boost these developmental nutrients in young people’s lives, whether they are called Promises, Developmental Assets, protective factors, or the “6 C’s” (competence, confidence, character, connection, caring/compassion, and contribution).<sup>8</sup> The knowledge is there, awaiting only our national commitment to apply it. Doing so will require investment in systems of dissemination, training, coaching, and other opportunities that build capacity in young people, families, youth workers, teachers, mentors, and institutions to tap and apply this knowledge in concrete systems and strategies.

**Mobilize caring adults to deliver the Promises—**Nine out of 10 children and three-fourths of adolescents experience caring adult relationships in their homes, extended families, schools, and neighborhoods. If these relationships are present in the lives of so many young people, how can they be mobilized to help deliver or advocate for the other four Promises? All of the Promises would move to higher priorities if adults who care about young people became articulate about the importance of offering young people the kinds of positive relationships, opportunities, and environments they need to flourish.

**Move beyond only preventing problems—**The five Promises emphasize child and youth development, focusing on the positive experiences and opportunities young people need to grow up successfully. This focus stands in stark contrast to the vast majority of initiatives and campaigns about young people that focus on their problems, challenges, or deficits.

It would be simplistic to say that simply emphasizing the positive would make the problems go away. Yes, the nation must attend to the challenges in young people’s lives, whether they be poverty, dropping out of school, violence, teen pregnancy, or underage drinking. At the same time, the relative neglect of positive development is due, to a large extent, to the inordinate focus that has been given to naming and trying to prevent deficits among children and youth. Although reducing high-risk behaviors clearly is important, too often such action has been seen as all that is needed, despite the admonition from scholars and practitioners



**We dare not forget these 15 million young people who *are* experiencing the Promises. In their stories of success we can find the hope and energy for change. We can do far better, however, and the proof is in the millions of America’s young people who *do* experience the Promises. It is time to ensure that their good fortune is not simply the accidental luck of a minority, but the destiny of *all* America’s young people.**

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alike that “problem-free is not fully prepared.”<sup>9</sup> The National Promises Study serves as a vivid reminder that nurturing strengths is an important part of the equation.

**Recognize that there are no quick fixes**—The situation captured in this study did not manifest itself overnight or because of simple and obvious causes. These Promises have been broken across decades, within rural, suburban, and urban communities, and regardless of which political parties have been in power. Over time, many, varied factors have contributed in small and large ways to the current situation.

So it would be unrealistic to expect that a single solution or strategy will, by itself, turn everything around. However, each strategy and approach can, over time, make a difference and begin to turn the tide in a positive direction. The challenge will be to muster the patience, tenacity, and consistency that are needed to sustain change or transformation over the long haul.

### **Conclusion: Broken Promises, Untapped Potential**

The Promises are clearly and strongly linked to young people doing better physically, psychologically, socially, educationally, and in their civic engagement. Yet a troubling proportion of adolescents (3 in 10)—and a smaller but still significant proportion of preteens (1 in 10)—are the have-nots, for whom the promises have been broken. They are not getting much in the way of positive influences from their peers, the adults around them, or the institutions they move through.

Most other young people are in the middle, not doing awful, not doing great, but capable of moving in either direction. Which way those in the middle go, and whether the haves keep having and the have-nots start to have, is up to all

of us. The result is that millions of America’s young people ages 6-17—more than 10 million by our estimates—are not experiencing the Promises. Another 23 million are only partly experiencing them.

At the same time, between one-fourth and one-third of today’s young people (25% for teenagers; 37% for preteens) are the “haves” for whom the five Promises have been fulfilled. They consistently experience caring, support, safety, challenge, and opportunity. We dare not forget these 15 million young people who *are* experiencing the Promises. In their stories of success we can find the hope and energy for change.

We can do far better, however, and the proof is in the millions of America’s young people who *do* experience the Promises. It is time to ensure that their good fortune is not simply the accidental luck of a minority, but the destiny of *all* America’s young people. The payoff will be thriving children and youth who are fully prepared for life, and a stronger America, at home and in the world.

*Peter C. Scales and Peter L. Benson*

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*The National Promises Study was conducted and a more in-depth report on this research (Keeping Our Promises to America’s Children and Youth) was written collaboratively by a team of staff from Search Institute and Child Trends: Peter C. Scales, Ph.D., Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., Karen Bartig, Katherine Streit, Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D., Laura H. Lippman, Brett Brown, Ph.D., and Christina Theokas, Ph.D. America’s Promise staff liaison to the project was Jonathan F. Zaff, Ph.D., AP’s Vice-President for Research. Kathryn L. Hong and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain helped with the creation of this article.*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Hamilton, S. H., & Sesma, A., Jr. (2006). Positive youth development: Theory, research, and applications. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 894–941). New York: Wiley.

<sup>2</sup> The Promises and outcomes indicators resulted from:

- An extensive review of the scientific literature, including incorporation of ideas from previous America's Promise contractors (e.g., Brandeis University; the Forum for Youth Investment);
- Due diligence review of existing national measures;
- Deep consultation with nationally known experts in early childhood and adolescence;
- Ongoing suggestions from America's Promise staff;
- Review of a draft list of the indicators at a May 2005 meeting of AP Alliance Partners, comprising the major youth organizations in the country, whose suggestions were incorporated into the final revision; and
- A review of indicators and scoring algorithms by members of AP's National Research Council, composed of dozens of the nation's leading child and youth development scholars.

Question items came from existing national surveys, Search Institute's comprehensive archive of survey items, and new items developed especially for this study.

<sup>3</sup> The polls measure 32 indicators of the Five Promises for adolescents (25 indicators for children 6–11), and 19 indicators loosely grouped into four major outcome domains (physical health, social and psychological health, educational achievement, and civic engagement) for adolescents (9 outcomes indicators for children 6–11). Each of the Promises is measured through multiple indicators, which in turn are composed of specific measures as reflected in the actual survey items. Numerous indicators needed to be measured within the approximately 15-minute telephone poll limits; thus, the majority of the indicators are measured with single items.

<sup>4</sup> Final samples were weighted to account for the oversampling, as well as to match the March 2004 Current Population Survey proportions by census region, age of child, gender, race/ethnicity, and family income. After weighting, the adolescent sample, for example, comprised 71% non-Hispanic White youth, 15% Hispanic, 10% African American, 1% Asian, and 3% other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Nineteen percent of those families had annual incomes under \$30,000, 61% were between \$30,000 and \$100,000, and 21% were more than \$100,000. Half of the sample was suburban, 30% urban, and 19% rural.

The response rate was 44%, a very high response rate to telephone polls by industry standards, and one of the highest achieved by the Gallup Organization over the past few years.

For results based on each of these three samples, one can say with 95% confidence that the margin of sampling error is +/- 3 percentage

points. Results using subsamples (e.g., comparing males and females, or different income levels) have larger margins of error. (Details on all the above are found in the extensive report on the National Promises Study titled *Keeping Our Promises to America's Children and Youth*; available from either [www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org) or [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org).)

<sup>5</sup> Benson, P. L. (2006). *All kids are our kids: What communities must do to raise caring and responsible children and adolescents* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Leffert, N., & Roehlkepartain, E. R. (1999). *A fragile foundation: The state of developmental assets among American youth*. Minneapolis: Search Institute; *Developmental assets: A portrait of your youth*. (2001). Minneapolis: Search Institute (1999–2000 school year aggregate dataset); Scales, P. C., & Leffert, N. (2004). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development* (2nd ed.). Minneapolis: Search Institute; Scales, P. C., Sesma, A., Jr., & Bolstrom, B. (2004). *Coming into their own: How developmental assets help promote positive growth in middle childhood*. Minneapolis: Search Institute; and Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., & Blyth, D. A. (2000). Contribution of developmental assets to the prediction of thriving among adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4, 27–46.

<sup>6</sup> These patterns consistently replicate those we have found repeatedly in research linking the Developmental Assets to positive outcomes.

<sup>7</sup> The differences are statistically significant whether analyzed as percentage differences in having a positive outcome or not, or as differences in mean outcome level between those not having, only partially having, and having the Promises (having 0–1, 2–3, and 4–5 Promises, respectively).

<sup>8</sup> See Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 591, 98–124; Eccles, J. S., & Gootman, J. A. (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Lerner, R. M., Fisher, C. B., & Weinberg, R. (2000). Toward a science for and of the people: Promoting civil society through the application of developmental science. *Child Development*, 71, 11–20. A synthesis of the major themes in the youth development field is also available in Benson, P. L., Scales, P. C., Hamilton, S. F., & Sesma, A., Jr. (with Hong, K. L., & Roehlkepartain, E. C.). (2006, November). Positive youth development so far: Core hypotheses and their implications for policy and practice. *Search Institute Insights & Evidence*, 3(1), 1–13, available for free downloading at [www.search-institute.org/research/Insights/](http://www.search-institute.org/research/Insights/)

<sup>9</sup> Pittman, K. J., & Fleming, W. P. (1991). *A new vision: Promoting youth development*. Testimony of Karen J. Pittman before the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development.