

# Building Strong Families

An In-Depth Report on a Preliminary Survey  
on What Parents Need to Succeed

From YMCA of the USA and Search Institute

By Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Peter C. Scales,  
Jolene L. Roehlkepartain, and Stacey P. Rude



The Building Strong Families poll represents the first phase of an ongoing collaboration between the YMCA of the USA and Search Institute around strong families and parenting.

This project is part of the larger Abundant Assets Alliance, which combines the resources of the YMCA of the USA, YMCA Canada, and Search Institute—three distinguished organizations with proven success in building strong kids, families, and communities. For more information, visit [www.abundantassets.org](http://www.abundantassets.org).

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A 16-page summary of these findings is available for downloading at [www.abundantassets.org](http://www.abundantassets.org). Bulk copies of the summary report may be purchased from Search Institute by calling, toll free, 877-240-7251 or visiting the catalog section of [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org).

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# Building Strong Families

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## Introduction

# Parents Expect a Lot from Themselves ... and Little from Anyone Else

*A poll of 1,005 parents in the United States shows that, despite general feelings of success, most parents receive little support or affirmation for their parenting efforts.*

If you want to get something done right, do it yourself. That's how the saying goes. Yet most people agree that it's not always the best approach in the long run. Always doing it yourself can be overwhelming. And there may be times when you simply can't do it, yet you may not have built the connections or shared the responsibility so that someone else can share in the task.

This new poll of parents,\* commissioned by YMCA of the USA and Search Institute, finds that parents of children and teenagers are just “doing it themselves,” without the support, encouragement, and networks that make it easier for them to raise strong kids and overcome the daily challenges of parenting.

What kind of support and encouragement do parents actually have? How do they view success? What challenges do they face? And what do parents say would help them as parents?

YMCA of the USA and Search Institute have joined together to explore these and related questions in a poll of 1,005 parents in the United States. This poll is a first step in a long-term commitment to build a new, positive vision of parents and families in which . . .

- The strengths of parents and families—regardless of their composition, cultural backgrounds, or other individual differences—are recognized, celebrated, and nourished;
- Parents and those who support them focus on building kids' strengths;
- Parenting is an ever-changing task throughout childhood and adolescence that requires ongoing learning, growth, and support; and
- A supportive, engaged community is seen as vital for nurturing and supporting children, teenagers, and their parents.

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\*We define “parents” broadly to include all those adults with primary responsibility for raising children. These include biological parents, adoptive parents, guardians, stepparents, grandparents raising grandchildren, or any other type of parenting relationship. We also use the term to show the collective sample of parents polled, whether they are single, divorced, widowed, or married.

## About the Poll

This preliminary poll, conducted by New York-based Global Strategy Group, involved a 15-minute telephone interview in May 2002 with 1,005 parents with children under age 18. Of the parents we interviewed, 82% are white, 84% are married, 45% have at least a college degree, and 49% make \$50,000 or more. Ten percent are African American, and 4% are Hispanic/Latino. Forty-one percent are fathers. A low response rate means that these findings are not representative of all American parents. However, the study does offer insights into the perspectives of a large, reasonably diverse sample of parents from many parts of the United States. Ongoing research by YMCA of the USA and Search Institute will further examine these and other issues. For more information, see Appendix B.

*Building Strong Families* is the first step in linking the YMCA's historic commitment to strong families with Search Institute's groundbreaking research on developmental assets, which are building blocks of healthy development for children and youth. (For more information on developmental assets, see Appendix A.) This approach not only highlights the positive ways that parents can—and do—support their children's healthy development, but it also highlights the importance of others—extended family, neighbors, friends, and community resources—not only in supporting parents but also being actively engaged in young people's lives.

## Key Findings from the Study

***Finding #1: A majority of the parents we surveyed are going it alone in the vital and challenging task of raising children and teenagers. Most say they don't often turn to their extended family, friends, and community resources for support in parenting.***

- Among those parents interviewed, 53% indicate that they do not regularly reach out for parenting help, advice, or support from immediate or extended family, friends, or community resources. Only 4% say they receive parenting support from all three sources.

- The parents in this study are most likely to seek support from family and friends. Thirty-six percent of parents interviewed say it is “very true” that they turn to family as a source of help, advice, or support, compared to 20% who turn to friends, and 11% who turn to community resources as an important source of help, advice, or support in their parenting.

***Finding #2: A key—but often lacking—resource for parents is a strong relationship with their spouse or partner. The parents we interviewed who experience an excellent partner relationship—regardless of whether they are married—are more likely to feel successful and up to the challenges of parenting.***

- Parents tend to feel consistently more successful if they report an “excellent” relationship compared to a “good,” “okay,” or “poor” relationship. Parents with a strong partner relationship were more likely to say they do things to help their kids grow up strong and healthy, experience fewer challenges as parents, and be open to other support and learning.
- Despite the importance of this relationship for parenting success, only half of the parents interviewed (50%) said their relationship with their partner was excellent.

***Finding #3: Most parents who were interviewed generally feel successful as parents most of the time. They do many things to help their children grow up strong and healthy.***

- Most survey respondents report doing many positive things daily with their child,

including showing love and support (97%), teaching basic values such as equality, honesty, and responsibility (89%), and helping their child feel good at something (87%).

- Most of these parents feel successful as parents most of the time. About one-third of those surveyed (34%) say they feel successful nearly every day, and an additional 54% feel successful on most days. Parents with younger children and African American parents report feeling successful more often than other parents do.

***Finding #4: Most parents interviewed face ongoing challenges.***

- Things parents polled say make parenting more difficult include job demands (50% “very much” or “somewhat”), conflicts or rivalries among children (48%), child being overscheduled (41%), and financial pressures (41%).
- Among those surveyed, here are the percentages who say each factor contributes to their feeling dissatisfied with their parenting: feeling unprepared for a situation (52%), feeling overwhelmed by everything (46%), and feeling unsupported by family or friends (34%).

***Finding #5: Many of the things that these parents say would really help them as parents are things that many people can easily do. These include:***

- Others telling them that they’re doing a good job as parents. Of the parents surveyed, 31% said this would help them very much, and 36% said it would help them somewhat.
- Having other adults whom they trust spend time with their kids. Of those surveyed, 29% said this would help very much; 42% said it would help somewhat.

## **Contents of This Report**

This report explores these findings, showing differences among various groups of parents and how these findings relate to other research in the field. It illustrates the poll results with stories from parents and community leaders across the country.

## **The YMCA’s Strong Families Agenda**

In the mid-1990s, YMCAs across the United States adopted the national theme: YMCA, We build strong kids, strong families, strong communities. This focus has led many YMCAs as well as YMCA of the USA to examine how they support and build strong families.

YMCA of the USA convened a forum of family program experts, from both within and outside the YMCA movement, to identify and discuss the critical issues facing families today. They identified 11 critical issues for families, many of which are reflected in this study:

1. Overwhelming options and schedules
2. Diverse and changing structures and demographics
3. The powerful influence of technology and the media
4. Increasing life expectancy
5. The challenge of staying healthy and securing health care
6. A lack of connection and community
7. The need for parents’ or guardians’ involvement in children’s education
8. A widening economic gap
9. Blending and changing gender roles
10. Perceptions of increased violence
11. The effects of September 11

SOURCE: YMCA of the USA, 2002.



Based on personal interviews that were conducted independently of the poll, these stories from a wide range of parents bring life to the statistics and also illustrate some of the innovative ways that communities are supporting parents.

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**This study seeks to begin balancing the preponderance of research and public attitudes that focus on the negatives, and, in the process, to challenge our society to focus even more energy on building strong kids, strong families, and strong communities.**

This report offers a glimpse into some of the strengths of parents and which factors help them feel more successful. Its intention is not to minimize the reality that some parents are not providing their children with the strengths they need and, in cases of abuse or neglect, are seriously undermining their children's chances at success. Nor does it seek to say that parents are (or need to be) perfect. Rather, it seeks to begin balancing the preponderance of research and public attitudes that focus on the negatives, and, in the process, to challenge our society to focus even more energy on building strong kids, strong families, and strong communities.

In the process of sharing the findings from the poll, this report invites parents, their children, community leaders, and policy makers to affirm and celebrate the ways parents are raising caring, responsible children. We hope that more people

and organizations recognize and act on the concrete, often simple, ways they can help parents be successful in their all-important task of caring for and nurturing our nation's youngest generations.



## Key Finding #1

# Most Parents Surveyed Are Going It Alone

*Most parents are going it alone in their parenting, not actively seeking parenting support and encouragement from their family, friends, and community resources. When they do seek support, they're most likely to turn to family and friends.*

Parenting should not be a solitary task. Research consistently shows that parents are most effective when they have the support and encouragement of those around them: people in their immediate and extended family, friends, and communities (Cochran & Niego, 1995; Lerner et al., 1995; Walsh, 1998). Rather than being a sign of weakness, seeking advice, help, and support from others strengthens parents and parenting, giving them the ideas, encouragement, and reinforcement they need to be good parents and to face the inevitable challenges of parenting.

Previous research has shown that parents who become isolated are more likely to be abusive or neglectful. Those with strong social networks tend to be more able to solve problems, adjust to change, and have a sense of belonging (Milardo, 1998). In addition, having a strong social network is associated with better interactions between the parent and child. Such networks are particularly powerful for single parents (Cochran & Niego, 1995). As James Garbarino (1995) wrote: “All systems run on energy. In the case of families, energy comes from family members, personalities, heritage, skills, and interests. But it also comes from outside the family system, from other systems and individuals in their interactions with the family. Family systems that become cut off run the risk of becoming depleted.”

Similarly, YMCA of the USA identified “a lack of connection and community” as a key issue facing families. An issue brief asserted that “the family that rarely leaves home or has trouble connecting with others is likely to feel isolated, helpless, and indifferent. The challenges are greater when parents are raising kids on their own without the support of an extended family or community” (YMCA of the USA, 2002, p. 25).

To gain a basic sense of community connectedness and support, we asked parents about where they turn for parenting help, support, or advice. The results suggest that most of these parents do not regularly reach out for parenting support from

others. When they do, they are most likely to reach out to family and friends, with fewer reaching out to other community resources. At the same time, most indicate that they are open to learning new things about being a parent, suggesting an openness to new opportunities.

## These Parents Most Often Turn to Family for Support

This survey asked parents about whether they access three potential sources of parenting help, support, or advice: immediate or extended family; friends; and community resources. As shown in Figure 1, only a minority of parents indicate that each of the other resources is an important source of advice and support for them.

When they do look to these sources of support, more than one-third of the parents surveyed say that it is “very true” they turn to their immediate or extended family for parenting help, support, or advice, making the family network the most common source of support. Yet, even in this case, only a minority of parents regularly turn to their immediate or extended family for parenting support. Furthermore, only one in five parents say that it is very true that they turn to friends for support, and just one in 10 (11%) turn to community resources.

Of course, many more parents surveyed indicated that it was “somewhat true” that they turn to family and friends for help, advice, and support. Thus, this finding may suggest that parents do not really want or need higher levels of support and engagement. Yet, other findings in this study suggests that many parents would value and benefit from higher levels of support, encouragement, and involvement from those around them.

A different issue is evident in the area of “community resources.” About two-thirds

### The Jain Family in Illinois

#### Adjusting to U.S. Culture

Fred and Yolanda Jain grew up in the Philippines. In 1975, Yolanda immigrated to the United States, following two of her siblings.

Fred came in 1985. Although Fred and Yolanda knew each other in the Philippines, they didn’t marry until 1987 in Illinois.



"I was 35 when I got married," Yolanda Jain says. "I was 37 when I had my first child. So I felt emotionally and spiritually mature."

She says it’s easier to raise kids in the Philippines compared to America. A key difference, Jain says, is the emphasis on family. "The kids have TV shows and many other influences here than just their families," she says. So she and her husband work hard to keep family an important aspect of their lifestyle. Although both parents work full time, they work different shifts. Jain works midnight to 8 a.m. as a nurse, and her husband works for the postal service during the day. "We have from 5 to 9 together," she says. "We make it a point that when we’re both off, we go out together as a family."

Figure 1

### Where Parents Turn for Help, Advice, or Support

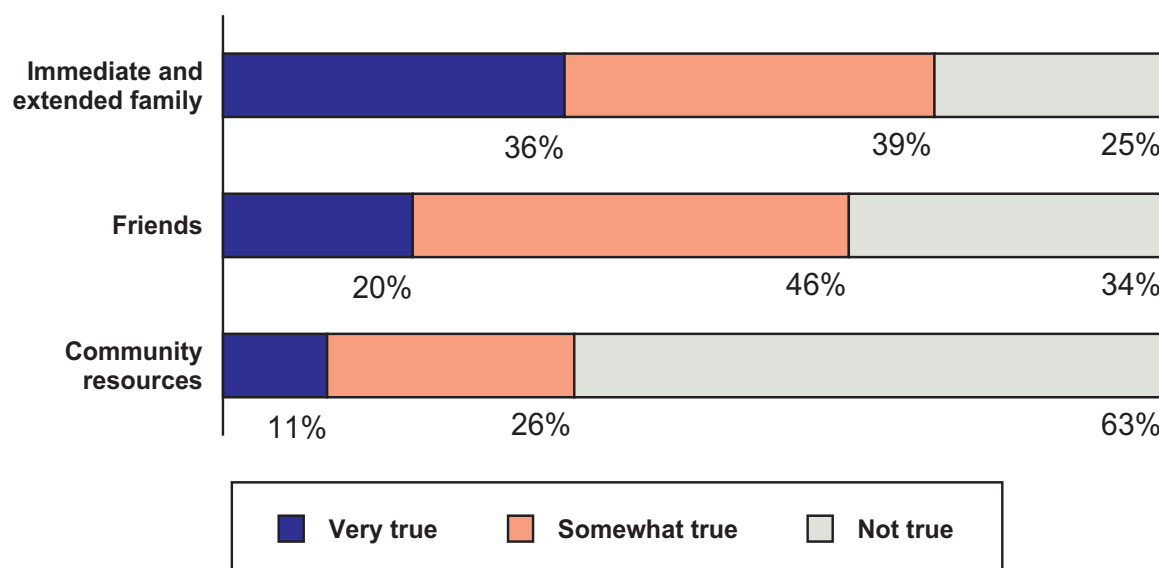


Figure 2

### Where Parents Turn for Help, Advice, or Support, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

(Percentage of parents who say it is “very true” that they turn to each group for help, advice, or support.)

	Immediate and Extended Family	Friends	Community Resources
<b>All</b>	36%	20%	11%
<b>Gender</b>			
Fathers	32%	11%	8%
Mothers	40%	26%	12%
<b>Race/ethnicity*</b>			
Black	48%**	25%**	19%
White	35%**	19%**	10%

\* Sample size for other racial/ethnic groups were too small to allow for meaningful comparisons.

\*\* Differences on these sources of support are not statistically significant.

of the parents surveyed (63%) say it is “not true” that they turn to their community for advice and support. This high percentage likely reflects the fact that the sample in this poll underrepresents those parents who may be most likely to need and seek formal community services: those with less income and less education.

In addition, this finding reinforces other research that shows that parents tend to prefer informal, personal sources of support and encouragement. For example, case studies by Search Institute of two economically distressed communities found that parents relied most heavily on family members (such as sisters) or friends. When they accessed formal institutions, it was generally through a particular individual in that setting whom they trusted (Saito et al., 2000; also see Cochran & Henderson, 1990; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1997; Jarrett, 1997; Milardo, 1988).

Not all parents seek these various sources of support equally (Figure 2). For example, mothers are more likely than fathers to say that it is “very true” that they turn to these resources for help and advice. Forty percent of mothers say they turn to immediate or extended family, 26% turn to friends, and 12% turn to community resources. In comparison, among fathers, 32% turn to immediate or extended family, 11% turn to friends, and 8% turn to community resources.

Given the historic emphasis of community support for families in the African

## The Winchester Family in Maryland

### Setting High Standards for Her Children

“I had my first child at age 15,” says Casandra Winchester, the mother of four children ages 23, 17, 15, and 5. “None of my children who are over 15 are parents. The fact that they don’t have children means I’m successful.”

Winchester says what turned her around was what her mother said to her after the birth of her first child. “She said, ‘Now you have two eyes looking up to you. Make sure you do what’s right.’”

Winchester has been working hard to do what’s right since then. She worked on a degree and established a career while raising her children. She got married twice, and when neither spouse was suited for her or her children, she got divorced. “My children are always my priority,” she says. “I make sure I am always there for my children.”

Although Winchester has been doing a lot of single parenting, she finds many supports around her. She points to the school system, church, the YMCA, and Johns Hopkins as other sources of support. “I live in East Baltimore, two blocks away from our Empowerment Zone,” she says, referring to federally funding community revitalization areas. “My youngest would not have a library or music if it weren’t for Johns Hopkins’s major funding to help the school district.” She says her son’s school has a parent liaison stationed at the school. At her 15-year-old’s school, everyone in the lower grades is paired with a senior buddy who keeps tabs on her or him. Winchester attends parenting classes and parenting socials at the school, and she says her church provides activities and mentors of her children. “If I’m having a problem, I have a support system,” she says. “We can share resources, war stories, and sometimes we just cry together.”

Winchester now has a partner. “We are indeed a family,” she says. “My definition of a family has changed to a group of people committed to one another and committed to the growth of everyone. My children know that me and my partner are there for them. My children know that they have people invested in and committed to their lives. That’s what important.”

American community (Olson & DeFrain, 1994; Phinney et al., 2000), it is not surprising that African American parents in this study are almost twice as likely as white parents to say it is “very true” that they seek advice and support from community resources. Overall, 19% of African American parents turn to community resources, compared to 10% of white parents.

Though it may be tempting to conclude that these findings diminish the value of community resources, there are several reasons community resources are essential. First, a sizeable minority of parents indicate that they highly value these community resources, suggesting that existing opportunities are meeting—or could be strengthened to meet—important needs for many parents. Second, our sample underrepresents parents for whom many community resources are designed, including those who are struggling economically, those who are single parents, and others who face particularly difficult challenges.

At the same time, these findings reinforce other research that suggests that formal programs and activities are only a limited part of parents’ network of support and information (Cochran & Henderson, 1993; Cochran & Niego, 1995; Saito et al, 2000). The challenge for communities and organizations is to develop strategies and approaches that not only provide formal opportunities for parents, but also broaden and strengthen their informal networks of care, advice, and information.

## **Few Parents Turn to Multiple Sources of Support**

Looking at each of the three sources of support separately gives a sense of where parents are most likely to turn for help, advice, and support. It is also important to know

### **YMCA of Westfield in New Jersey**

#### **Building Community among Families**

Many parents in Westfield, New Jersey, work in New York City and commute, which entails long hours away from the family. To help families have quality time together, the YMCA of Westfield, New Jersey, offers inexpensive weekend and weeklong getaways for families. “We do things to connect families,” YMCA Family Life Director David Mueller says. “Building community among families is so important.”

Most of the weekend trips take place at Promised Land State Park in Pennsylvania, which is about two hours away by car. Mueller groups three families on the getaway for food preparation. The families buy food together and then take turns cooking and cleaning up over the weekend. “We do family games to get people to meet each other,” he says, noting that families also participate in hikes, campfires, service projects, talent shows, and other structured activities at camp. “Families in the Northeast can be slow to warm up to other people, so getting to know others is really important.”

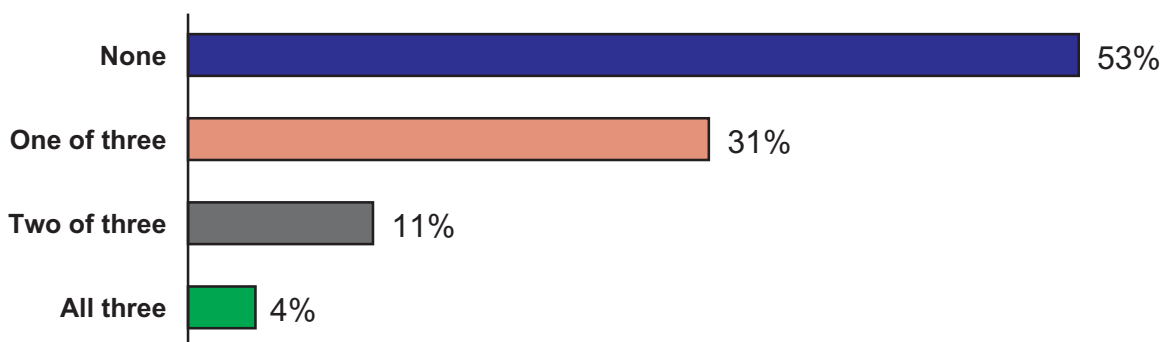
Some family weekend camps are offered during the summer while others occur over long weekends when school is not in session. The Y also offers a weeklong family vacation to the YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park, Colorado.

Because of these weekend and weeklong getaways, parents have told Mueller that their family’s best friends are people they met at these YMCA family events. Others say they sit together at soccer games when they bump into each other. Mueller says these events bring family members closer to each other—and build community among families as well.

Figure 3

### How Many Sources of Support Do Parents Tap?

Parents were asked whether they turn for parenting help, advice, or support to (1) immediate or extended family, (2) friends, and (3) community resources. We then calculated the proportion of parents who regularly sought support from one, two, or three of these potential parenting resources.\*



\* Based on parents who said it was "very true" that they turned to each group for parenting help, advice, or support. Does not add to 100% due to rounding.

## The Kenosha Parent Network in Wisconsin

### Connecting Parents to Fun and Learning

Through the Kenosha Parent Network, parents receive resources, training, programs, activities, and leadership development throughout Kenosha County in Wisconsin. Established in 1989, the network launched eight parent education programs in its first year, which have now grown to 197 a year.

"To coordinate 197 programs, each site selects a parent network organizer," says Patricia Demos, co-chair of the Healthy Communities • Health Youth Initiative of Kenosha County and community school relations manager for the school district. "The organizer participates in a leadership development program and organizes the evening program." Sites include schools (elementary, middle, and high schools) and community centers.

Each school presents a monthly Chat and Chew parent education series, which is planned by parents for parents. Parents vote on topics to be presented and suggest days and times for the program. Topics have included bullying, games for the whole family, homework hassles, single-parenting issues, balancing work and family demands, and taking care of yourself. Child care and a meal are provided at each session.

Families with young children can locate child care, dentists, pediatricians, family services, preschools, congregations, organizations, and services through the 70-page handbook *A Resource Guide for Kenosha County Families with Young Children*. Families with older children can find family and youth activities in the 62-page *Everything under the Sun: A Youth and Family Activity Guide of Things to Do in the Kenosha Area*. The guide highlights specific recreation, social events, theater, camping, volunteering, field trips, education, special events, ethnic festivals, street dances, and organizations that provide activities for families.

"As parents, we have a tremendous responsibility in raising children," Demos says. "Being a parent means we are their first teacher, role model, inspiration, and moral guide, and it is hard work." Through the Kenosha Parenting Network, parents find the resources they need to guide them through the hard work of parenting so that they can become even more effective parents.



Figure 4

### Sources of Support and Parents' Asset-Building Actions that Contribute to their Children's Healthy Development

	No Supports*	One Support	Two or Three Supports***
Highly consistent asset builders**	35%	37%	55%
Moderately consistent asset builders	33%	36%	30%
Less consistent asset builders	33%	27%	15%

\* Based on parents who said it was "very true" that they turned to each of three groups for parenting help, advice, or support: (1) immediate or extended family, (2) friends, and (3) community resources.

\*\* Categories are based on the mean score on 11 items related to building developmental assets. Once mean scores were calculated, the parents were divided roughly into thirds: high, medium, and low. For communication purposes, we label them "highly consistent asset builders," etc.

\*\*\* Levels of asset-building action are significantly different between parents who report two or three of the three supports compared to none or one of the supports. Differences are not significant between those who report no supports compared to those who report one support.

whether parents are likely to turn to just one source of support, or whether they have multiple sources—a web of relationships and resources that they can access to strengthen their parenting and help them through challenges and difficulties.

To gain a sense of whether parents experience that kind of web, we analyzed the proportion of parents in this sample who said it was "very true" that they turned to one, two, or three of the identified sources of support (immediate or extended family, friends, and community resources). As shown in Figure 3, only 4% of the parents surveyed sat that it was "very true" that they turn to all three of these resources (family, friends, and community) for parenting help. An additional 11% report turning to two of these sources, and 31% turn to one. However, 53% of parents report that they do not regularly turn to any of these three resources. This high percentage reinforces the notion that most parents truly are on their own in the parenting task.

Additional analysis shows that the number of sources of support parents experience is related to the quality of their relationship with their spouse or parenting partner and with how much they engage in positive actions with their children.

For example, 48% of the parents surveyed who do not regularly turn to any of the three sources of support report having an "excellent" relationship with their partner. Among those who report having one of the three sources of support, 57% report having an excellent relationship. Finally, 66% of those reporting that they turn to two or three of these sources of support say they have an excellent relationship with their partner.

In terms of asset-building actions (explained more fully in Key Finding #3 and in Appendix A), parents with more sources of support were more likely to say they engage in more of the positive actions that contribute to their child's development (which we call "asset-building actions"). To illustrate the connections, we sorted the parents into three groups based on how much they say they do 11 different



asset-building actions (shows in Finding #3). The top third (based on their mean score) are “highly consistent asset builders,” and the bottom third are “less consistent asset builders.” As shown in Figure 4, parents are much more likely to be consistent asset builders when they turn to more sources of support. In addition, very few of “less consistent asset builders” turned to at least two or three of these sources of support. These findings underscore that having multiple sources of support is a sign of strength—and a resource to turn to in parenting.

## Parents Are Open to Growth and Learning

Most of the parents in this poll appear to be ready and willing to learn. Indeed, the vast majority of these parents (80%) strongly agree there is “always” something more they can learn about being a good parent (Figure 5).

This openness extended across all groups of parents, including African American and white parents and parents of all socioeconomic groups. In fact, the only areas where differences emerge are based on religious affiliation (Protestants somewhat more open than Catholics and those with no religious preference) and gender, with mothers being somewhat more open to learning than fathers. Eighty-four percent of

mothers say it is “very true” that there is always something more to learn as a parent, compared to 75% of fathers.

This widespread openness to learning is good news. Parents who believe they can always learn something more about parenting say that they . . .

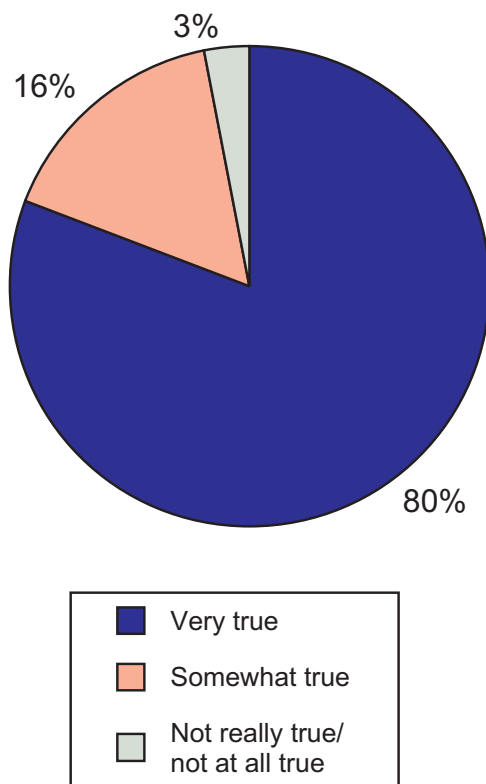
- Are open to a wide range of sources of support and information;
- More often turn to family, friends, and community resources;
- Less often feel things that make it harder for them to parent; and
- Are engaged with their children in more ways that contribute to young people’s healthy development.

If these parents are accurately sharing their openness to learning, there is great potential for supporting parents in communities. Yet most parents may not be looking for formal programs or workshops, but may be more interested in informal, relational opportunities for learning, affirmation, and support.

Figure 5

### Parents’ Openness to Learning

Responses to: “There is always more for me to learn about being a good parent.”



## Key Finding #2

# Many Parents Interviewed Lack a Strong Relationship with a Spouse or Partner

Parents who report having an “excellent” relationship with a spouse or parenting partner are more likely than others—including those who say their relationship is “good”—to feel successful as parents. Yet only about half of the parents surveyed indicated that their relationship with their partner is excellent.

A key, but often lacking, resource for parents is a strong relationship with their spouse or partner. The parents in this study who report having an “excellent” partner relationship—whether or not they were married—are more likely to feel successful and up to the challenges of parenting. Indeed, of all the factors we analyzed in this poll, quality of partner relationship proved to be the most consistent predictor of a wide range of parenting dynamics—more consistent than income, education, profession, religiosity, race/ethnicity, and other variables.

## The Importance of a Strong Partner Relationship

Numerous other researchers have pointed to the quality of a parent’s relationship with a spouse or partner as being an important factor in parenting success. Wilson and Gottman (1995) report on direct links between the quality of parents’ relationship and children’s development. They identify correlations between the quality of parents’ relationship and childhood stress and peer relations among children. (Also see Amato et al., 1995; Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Harold & Conger, 1997; Shamir et al., 2001.) In addition, Doherty et al. (1998) found that, while contact with a noncustodial father generally benefits children, high levels of contact with the father were associated with negative outcomes in cases where the parents had more serious relational conflicts. In their review of the current research, Moore and colleagues (2002) conclude that “the research consensus is that a ‘healthy marriage’—and not just any marriage—is optimal for child well-being. Marriages that are violent or high conflict are certainly ‘unhealthy’ for both children and adults” (p. 5).

Though preliminary (based on a single item and simple correlations, which cannot show cause-and-effect relationships), the findings from this survey reinforce the importance of the partner relationship—not just for the parent but also for the par-

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**“The research consensus is that a ‘healthy marriage’—and not just any marriage—is optimal for child well-being.”**

—Moore et al., 2002

enting task and the children. In fact, of all the individual variables we studied, quality of partner relationship proved to be most consistent related to a wide range of parenting dynamics. Parents who report an excellent relationship with their spouse or partner are more likely than other parents to:

- Feel successful as parents most of the time;
- Experience fewer challenges as parents;
- Feel confident in dealing with the daily challenges of parenting;
- Seek support from immediate or extended family as well as community resources;
- Believe that various opportunities (such as talking with other parents, seeking advice from a trusted professional, having access to parenting help they can use in private, etc.; see Finding #5) could “really help” them as parents; and
- Engage in asset-building actions—parenting strategies that contribute to young people’s healthy development.

## The Borud Family in Idaho

### Staying Connected as Husband and Wife—and as a Family

For Lynn Borud and his wife, Claudia, the biggest challenge is keeping connected with each other and their kids when everyone is so busy. Their eldest is at the University of Oregon. Their middle child started college this fall, and their youngest is a senior in high school. One way they have stayed connected has been by making their home a welcoming place not only for their kids but also for their kids’ friends. “Our house is the destination place for many kids,” Lynn Borud says. “Our grocery bills are much higher because we’re feeding so many kids.” Borud has learned, however, that when you feed kids, they’re more apt to open up and talk.

Some of the conversation is about ordinary, everyday things. But other discussions are about tough issues.

“In the past 12 and half months, my kids have lost five friends,” Borud says. Two died in car accidents where alcohol was involved, and three committed suicide. “That’s been really difficult. So we keep talking about those things.”

As part of a two-parent family, Borud says it’s essential for him and his wife to be in sync with parenting. “Claudia and I agree on values and how we parent,” he says. “In a two-parent family, it’s a one-two punch around the house. I don’t mean physically, I mean as reinforcement. We surround our kids with dependable, responsible, caring adults. Parents aren’t going to get it done on their own.”



## Relationship with Spouse or Parenting Partner

Despite the importance of this relationship to parenting success, only half of the parents surveyed (50%) believe that their relationship with their spouse or partner is “excellent,” and 12% believe the relationship is fair or poor (Figure 6). This finding is consistent with the *1997 National Study of the Changing Workplace*, which found that 51% of workers rated their marital satisfaction at the highest level (Bond et al., 1998).

Though people who are married are more likely to report having an excellent relationship with their current partner, marriage itself is no guarantee of a high-quality partner relationship.\* Among married parents, 56% say they have an excellent relationship with their spouse or current partner, compared to 36% of unmarried parents.

## Is the Standard Too High?

Are we setting the standard too high? After all, many more parents report that their relationship is “good.” Yet our data show that “good” isn’t necessarily good enough—though it is certainly better than “okay” or “poor.” Parents tend to feel consistently more successful if they report an “excellent” relationship with their spouse or partner when compared to those who report a “good,” “okay,” or “poor” relationship.

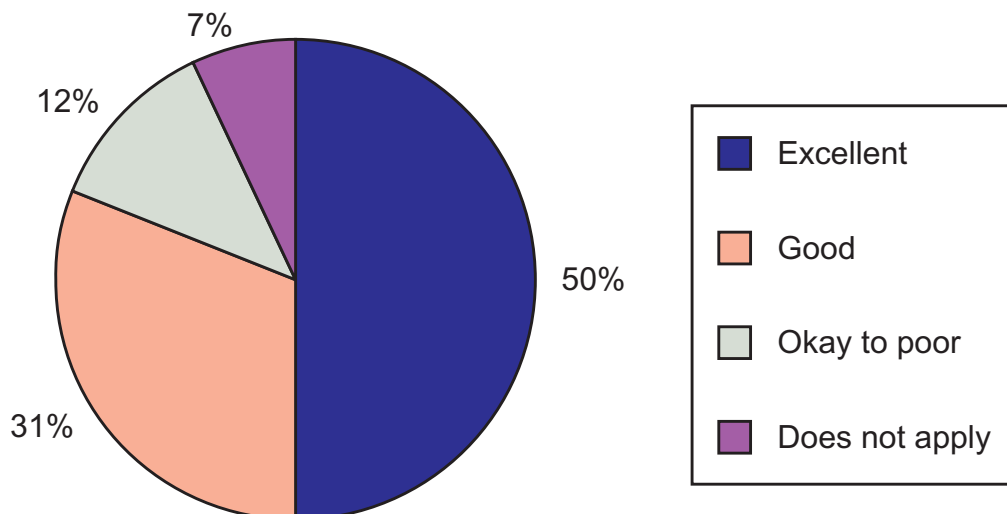
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\* The quality of one’s partner relationship has only a relatively small correlation with marital status (.20, slightly favoring married parents).

Figure 6

### Quality of Relationship with Spouse or Partner

How parents describe their relationship with their “current spouse or partner.”



## Family Life Council of Greater Greensboro in North Carolina

### Building Strong Marriages

One way to build strong families is to nurture strong marriages. Several years ago, the Family Life Council of Greater Greensboro in North Carolina began working with local congregations and religious organizations to promote a Community Marriage Covenant. So far, 74 congregations and religious organizations have signed the pledge, saying they will actively support couples both before and after the wedding ceremony. These religious organizations do this by providing premarital counseling and mentoring programs. In addition, the Family Life Council of Greater Greensboro offers two levels of Couple Communication workshops so that couples can learn to communicate more effectively and develop more satisfying, happier relationships.

By committing to strengthening all kinds of families, the Family Life Council of Greater Greensboro also provides a program for parenting children of divorce. Surveying parents about two to three months after completing the program, program providers have found that at least three out of four parents reported that they gained information to improve things with their ex-spouse, had a less acrimonious relationship, and had a better relationship with their children after attending.

The Family Life Council of Greater Greensboro also provides programs for parenting teenagers, parenting children ages 2 to 12, parenting children in stepfamilies, single parenting, supporting teen parents, and helping parents who want to regain custody of their children.

The Guilford County Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth initiative is housed at the Family Life Council of Greater Greensboro. Initiative leaders say, “Our vision for Guilford County is that everyone who touches a child’s life will think like and care like a parent.”

Part of the issue may be that it is “socially desirable” for people to have a good relationship with their partner, so people may tend to overreport it in a poll. In addition, it may be that an “excellent” relationship suggests a higher level of intentionality and active support in the relationship, whereas “good” may suggest adequacy but less of an active resource for parenting. Further exploration of these dynamics is needed to determine whether there are “tipping points” or thresholds in the quality of relationship that impact parenting practices and satisfaction.

### Building Strong Partner Relationships

Though there is clear evidence that children and teenagers benefit from a strong partner relationship, much less is known scientifically about how to promote and sustain healthy marriages. Indeed, most of the research has focused on understanding factors that predict unhealthy marriages or divorce, such as criticism, contempt, and stonewalling (Moore et al., 2002). An important area for additional research is to understand more fully not only how to intervene when a relationship becomes problematic but also how to build and maintain strengths in marriage and other partner relationships—for the sake of the adults involved, as well as the children.

## Key Finding #3

# A Majority of the Parents Surveyed Feel Successful as Parents Most of the Time

Parents see their success both in what they do and in their children's lives and choices. Most parents surveyed say they feel successful most of the time, though only a minority feel successful every day. Most parents report doing many things that contribute to their children's healthy development.

Our society expects parents to take primary—if not exclusive—responsibility for raising children and teenagers (Scales, in press). Yet most American adults don't seem to think parents are up to the task. In fact—judging from the TV news and public opinion polls—parents are more likely to be part of the problem, not part of the solution. About two-thirds of American adults think parents are doing a “fair” or “poor” job raising their children, and fewer than 5% believe parents are doing an “excellent” job (Public Agenda, 2000). People generally feel that parents aren't involved enough in schools, are poor role models, and do not set enough limits for their children. Many people, particularly those over age 50, say that the baby boomers are worse parents than earlier generations. One-half of people asked attribute children's many problems today to irresponsible parents (Duffett et al., 1999). As Farkas and Johnson write: “Americans believe that parents are fundamentally responsible for the disappointing state of today's youth. People say parents fail to teach youngsters right from wrong and pass on the values children need to learn in order to become productive members of society” (1997, p. 13).

More recently, a Public Agenda survey of U. S. parents finds that parents also believe that they have a long way to go in instilling important values and character traits. For example, 83% of parents believe it's absolutely essential to teach their children to have self-control and self-discipline, yet only 34% of parents believe they have succeeded in doing this (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2002).

These perceptions stand in contrast with a wide range of research that concludes that most parents are generally doing a reasonably good job as parents. While there are certainly no perfect parents and there are times when some parents do considerable damage to their children (such as abuse or neglect), the vast majority of par-

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**While there are certainly no perfect parents, the vast majority of parents meet their children's basic needs and contribute significantly—more than anyone else—to their children's healthy growth and development.**



ents meet their children's basic needs and contribute significantly—more than anyone else—to their children's healthy growth and development. For example, a National Commission on Children survey of children and parents found that most children are “growing up in families that tend diligently and lovingly to their physical, social, and emotional needs” (1991, p. 28). Search Institute surveys of 217,000 6th- to 12th-grade youth have found that 70% of youth experience love and support from their families (Search Institute, 2002). Furthermore, about 90% of both boys and girls say their parents really care for them and that they respect their parents (Horatio Alger Association, 1998). An informal survey of 84,000 6th-12th graders found that half of adolescents gave their parents a grade of “A” in raising them (Damon, 2001), and a Gallup Youth Survey found that 97% of teenagers say they get along with their parents—a level that has been consistent since Gallup began asking the question in 1977 (Carroll, 2002). And 72 percent of teenagers say that they can “always trust my parents to be there for me when I need them” (Duffett et al., 1999, p. 9).

While it is limited to the self-perceptions of the parents surveyed, *Building Strong Families* looks at parents' own understanding of their success and their engagement with their children. We find that most of these parents actually do feel successful—though certainly not all the time. In fact, about nine out of ten parents surveyed say they feel successful as parents most of the time. Furthermore, most of these parents report that they spend significant time with their children and do many other positive activities that are key to young people's healthy development. These responses from parents highlight the contrast between parents' own perspectives on their parenting when juxtaposed with the negative public perceptions of parents.

## How Do Parents Define Parenting Success?

This poll did not presume a single definition of parenting “success.” Rather, in an open-ended question (“What is your definition of being a successful parent?”), we asked parents for their definition. Parents in this poll named both things they do as well as qualities that they see emerging in their children. Below are the themes (based on coding of parents' responses) that at least 10% of the parents surveyed say defined being a successful parent:

- Having children who are respectful, exhibit good behavior, and have positive values;
- Giving love to their children;
- Being involved and making the time to be there for their children; and
- Helping their children lead a healthy, productive, successful life.

Given the widespread focus on preventing a wide range of problems in young people, it is notable that only 1% of the parents surveyed said that the definition of a successful parent was keeping their children off drugs. Indeed, most of these parents identify areas of positive development as key to defining parenting success.

## How Successful Do Parents Feel?

Most of the parents we surveyed say they feel successful most of the time (Figure 7). About one-third of those (34%) say they feel successful as parents nearly every



Figure 7

### How Often Do These Parents Feel Successful as Parents?

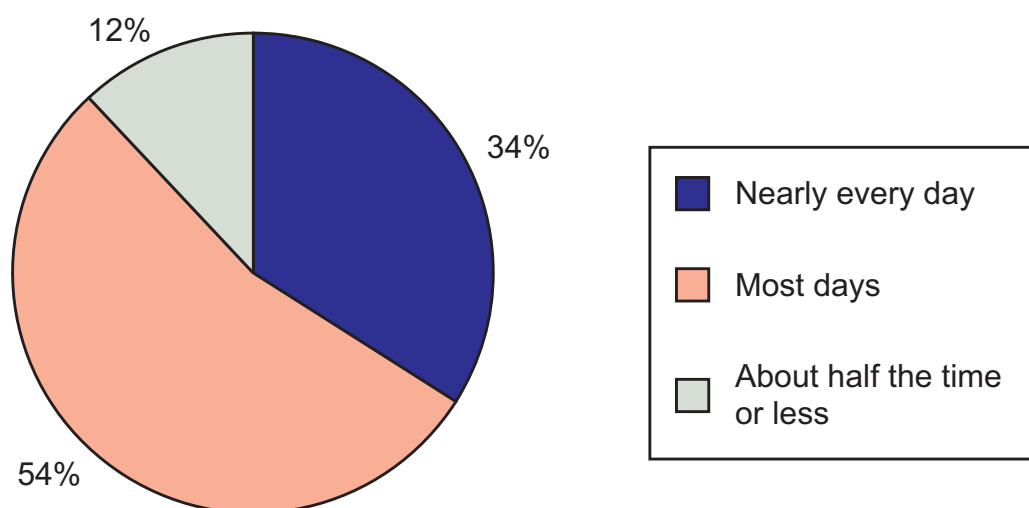


Figure 8

### How Often Parents Feel Successful, by Selected Characteristics

		Feel Successful Nearly Every Day	Feel Successful Most Days or Less Often
Parent's age	18 to 34	54%*	46%
	35 to 44	31%	69%
	45 to 54	31%	69%
	55 or older	42%	58%
Marital status	Married	32%	68%
	Unmarried	46%*	54%
Length of neighborhood residency	Less than 1 year	30%	70%
	1 to 5 years	43%*	57%
	More than 5 years	31%	69%
Quality of spouse/partner relationship	Excellent	38%*	62%
	Good	28%	72%
	Fair or poor	31%	69%
Race/ethnicity	African American	49%*	51%
	White	31%	69%

\* Significantly more likely than others to feel successful nearly every day.



## The Harris Family in Colorado

### Feeling Successful at Home— and at Work

Sandra Harris has always believed in the importance of following your passions. As a parent of three kids, ages 17, 19, and 21, she has shown her children that work and family can both be top priorities, even though it isn't easy.

"Most of the workplaces I've been in, we had a little area for them to hang out at work," she says. She believes it's important for companies to be family friendly and for employees who are parents to connect with each other to talk about work-and-family issues.

For the past 10 years, an important part of Harris's job has entailed traveling. Whenever she travels on business, she tries to make sure she is gone for no more than two or three days at a time. She also

tries to take one of her kids with her once in a while. "It has helped me to get to know them in a new way, a different way," she says.

When she was younger, Harris' daughter Angie had a recurring dream that her mother would travel and never come back. Now that she's 19, Angie has a different perspective. "Now she's working on her career," Harris says, "and she says that seeing me work has shown her what it takes to be passionate about and involved with work."

day, and an additional 54% feel successful on most days. As shown in Figure 8, there are some differences among parents about how successful they feel. The following groups of parents are more likely than others to feel successful:

- Younger parents (those age 18 to 34);
- Those who have lived in their current neighborhood 1 to 5 years;
- Parents whose child is 4 or younger, particularly compared to parents of 11- to 15-year-olds (within the sample of 444 parents with only one child; not shown).
- Those who have an excellent relationship with their spouse or partner;
- African American parents (when compared to white parents); and
- Unmarried parents.

Several patterns merit comment. First, the first three differences are likely related: age of child, age of parent, and length of time in neighborhood (which suggests the dynamic of new families moving into new homes, rather than the traditional measure of stability). These patterns suggest that these parents may feel most successful in the earlier stages of parenting than later. Additional exploration is needed to determine whether this interpretation is accurate and, if so, why.

The sense of success among parents of the youngest and the oldest children is also an intriguing finding. It's likely that these parents are in stages of parenting for which there is more apparent evidence of success: early childhood, when children seem to grow by leaps and bounds, and in later adolescence and young adulthood, when the results from the years of hard work may be more evident. In between,

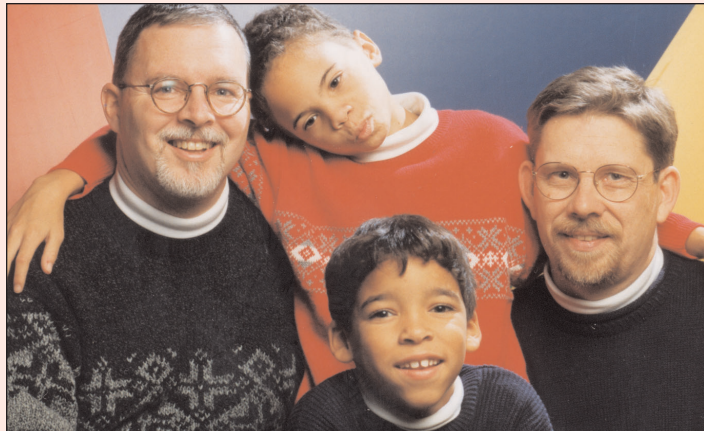
parents may not see as much evident progress and may face new challenges (such as times of transition into adolescence) that don't always lend themselves to *feeling* successful.

Finally, it is noteworthy and counter to much existing research (see, for example, Moore et al., 2002) that unmarried parents more often feel successful than married parents. Perhaps unmarried parents are more aware of the challenges they face as parents and, thus, feel more successful as they take on those challenges. Or it may be that some married couples (particularly those without a strong relationship—one of the other important factors) also struggle with differences in parenting and having a partner who sees—and points out—the flaws (keeping in mind that only half of these parents report an “excellent” partner relationship). However, because of the limitations of our sample (see Appendix B), this finding should be interpreted cautiously, as it may be little more than an artifact of the particular sample in this study.

## The Lander Family in Minnesota

### Being Intentional about Creating the Family Life You Want

Steve and Ben Lander adopted two boys at birth, who are now age 12 and 14. Because of the family's diversity, Steve and Ben have been intentional about the way they live—and parent. “We’ve made conscious decisions in choosing our neighborhood, school, and church,” Steve Lander says. He and his partner, Ben, have sought out places that actively welcome them.



When the boys were young, Steve and Ben belonged to a parent group that met monthly to discuss the challenges and rewards of two-dad families. “All the parents also were Caucasian and had adopted kids with a different racial makeup,” Steve says. The parent group helped everyone wrestle with the many diversity issues in their lives. Today the family is active in Rainbow Families, a Minnesota membership organization that works to create a safe, just, and affirming world for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents and their children.

“Our school and our church are open and inclusive,” Steve says, noting that it's important for a family to surround itself with the environments that help family members thrive. “We put a lot of effort into finding appropriate resources,” he says. “We’ve avoided situations and environments that would be more difficult for our family.”

That doesn't mean Steve and Ben have isolated their kids from the world. The family talks about when and how to be out about their status as a two-dad family. This past summer, the Landers went to Chicago and talked about what it was like to be in a more racially diverse place than Minnesota, and how more people looked like the sons (who are Asian and black) than the dads (who are white).

“Our job as parents is to help them become autonomous,” Steve says. “Our [older] son is 14, and in four years, he'll be out in the world. Four years isn't a very long time to help him develop all the things he needs to succeed.”

## Doing the Right Things: Asset-Building Actions

As part of the poll, parents were asked about a number of ways they can contribute to young people's healthy development. The items were based on Search Institute's research-based framework of 40 developmental assets, which are positive experiences, relationships, and personal qualities that young people need to succeed and thrive. Surveys of more than 1.8 million middle and high school youth across the United States since 1989 consistently show that young people who experience more of these assets are less likely to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors (such as having sexual intercourse, using alcohol and other drugs, and engaging in violent behaviors) and more likely to engage in thriving behaviors (such as succeeding in school, helping others, and valuing diversity).

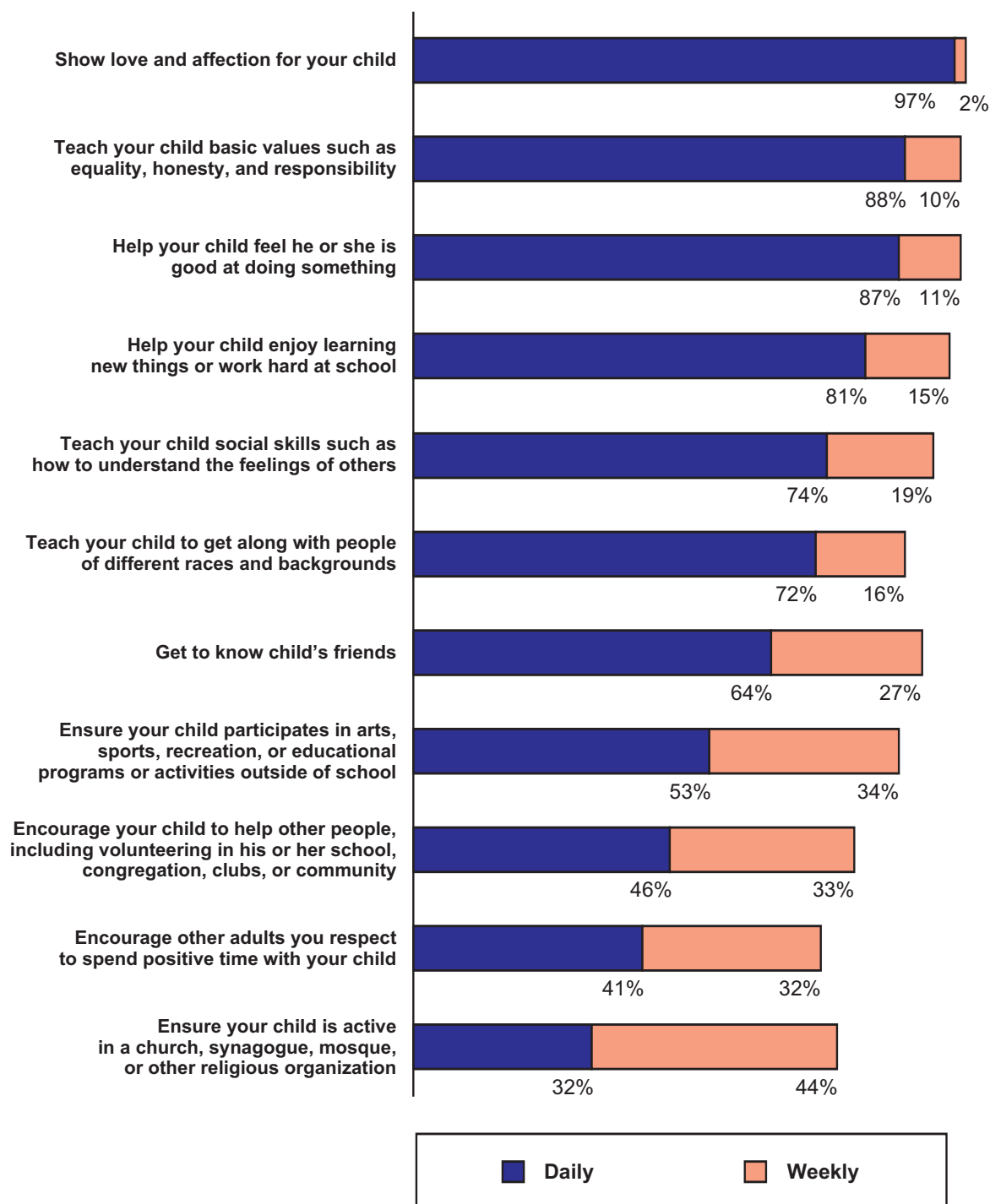
Figure 9

### Eleven Parenting Actions Measured That Relate to Each of the Eight Categories of Developmental Assets

Asset Category	Survey Items Linked to the Asset Category
Support (Assets #1-6)	Show love and affection for your child (see asset #1: family support)  Encourage other adults you trust to spend positive time with your child (see asset #3: other adult relationships)
Empowerment (Assets #7-10)	Encourage your child to help other people, including volunteering in his or her school, congregation, club, or community (see asset #9: service to others)
Boundaries & Expectations (Assets #11-16)	Get to know your child's friends (related to asset #15: positive peer influence)
Constructive Use of Time (Assets #17-20)	Ensure your child participates in arts, sports, recreation, or educational programs or activities outside of school (see assets #17: creative activities and #18: youth programs)  Ensure your child is active in a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious organization (see asset #19: religious community)
Commitment to Learning (Assets #21-25)	Help your child enjoy learning new things or work hard at schoolwork (see assets #21: achievement motivation and #22: school engagement)
Positive Values (Assets #26-31)	Teach your child basic values such as equality, honesty, and responsibility (see assets #27: equality and social justice, #29: honesty, and #30: responsibility)
Social Competencies (Assets #32-36)	Teach your child a social skill such as how to understand the feelings of others (see asset #33: interpersonal competence)  Teach your child to get along well with people of different races and backgrounds (see asset #34: cultural competence)
Positive Identity (Assets #37-40)	Help your child feel he or she is good at doing something (see asset #38: self-esteem)

Figure 10

## Parents Who Say They Do Selected Asset-Building Actions Daily or Weekly



As shown in more detail in Appendix A, parents play an important role in building all 40 assets. In some cases, the assets relate directly to family life and parenting (such as asset #1: family support; asset #2: positive family communication; #6: parent involvement in school; #11: family boundaries; #16: high expectations; and #20: time at home). In addition, parents play an indirect role (such as modeling, advocating for their child, or making other positive opportunities available) in all of the other assets. (For more information, see Appendix A.)

In this survey of parents, we asked about how often parents took 11 different positive actions, each related to one of the categories of developmental assets. (See Figure 9.) When drawn together, these items create a preliminary measure of parents' own perception of their contribution to their children's healthy development. These actions are consistent with the research on the role of parents in young people's development (Scales & Leffert, 1999) and the major tasks of parenting (Simpson & Roehlkepartain, 2003; Amato & Fowler, 2002).

When asked about how often parents do these selected actions, at least three-fourths of the parents surveyed say they do all of these things at least weekly, and usually daily (Figure 10). Across all incomes, racial and cultural groups, education-

## The Williams Family in Texas

### Emphasizing Values in a Complex World

"When I hear Westin or Sable say something to their friends that I would say, I get a smile on my face, and I think, yes, they've heard it. Yes, they get it," says Annette Vanzant Williams, the parent of a 10-year-old and a 6-year-old. "When they act in ways I would like them to act, I know they're catching on."

She says that recently when the family was watching television, her 10-year-old commented about the way people were acting on a show. "He said, 'Mom, I know that's not how they're suppose to treat women,'" she says. "The fact that he recognized I would disapprove makes me feel good."

Because her children attend a predominantly Anglo public school, she reads books for insights she otherwise wouldn't have. "I just finished reading *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, by Beverly Daniel Tatum," she says.

This summer, her son attended a church camp where another boy called him a racially insulting name. Kids reported the incident to the adults in charge, who immediately called the parents. Vanzant Williams said Westin realized that the boy had said a bad word, but it didn't seem to affect him. "He just didn't see himself associated with that word," she says. Although this situation turned out well, she can't help but wonder if there are times when her kids face racial bias. "You can't protect your children from the world," she says. "You don't know what some kid has said to your kid. The unknowing for me is a challenge."

Vanzant Williams says it takes a lot of time to be an effective parent. "When I'm tired, I don't always have time. But I make time. They need more of my time now."





al levels, and types of families in this poll, most of the parents surveyed report that they regularly do things to ensure that their children have what they need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.

## Helping Their Children . . . on Their Own

While the differences among the asset-building actions are not dramatic, they do suggest that these parents are more likely to focus on what they can do themselves for their children rather than also connecting with people and places that can contribute to their children's healthy development.

- The parents surveyed almost universally indicate that they do the asset-building actions that can be done through their one-to-one relationship with their child. Indeed, the top five actions that at least nine out of 10 of these parents report doing at least weekly can occur within the family. The remaining six actions involve building connections in the community.
- Despite significant public education in the past decade regarding the importance of youth development opportunities, the three actions that involve constructive use of time (assets #17-20) were rated somewhat lower than most others.
- One of the least common actions involves encouraging other adults to spend time with their child, even though (as shown in Key Finding #5) parents report that one of the most helpful things for them as parents would be “people I trust, such as friends, neighbors, or extended family, spending a greater amount of positive time with my child.” Other recent Search Institute research shows that a major barrier to other adults' active engagement with young people is a perceived lack of parental permission or invitation to be involved (Scales et al., 2002; Scales, in press).

It is important to note that some of these patterns may reflect the statistical bias in the sample toward white, middle-class, well-educated parents. Other research has consistently found that people in communities of color and in lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to turn to others for support in parenting (Cochran & Niego, 1995).

## Differences among Parents in Asset-Building Actions

Both mothers and fathers, parents from all types of families, cultural groups, economic levels, and education levels feel they engage in these asset-building actions quite consistently. At the same time, some groups of parents say they do these things more consistently than others.

**Gender**—In our sample, mothers are more likely than fathers to do these asset-building actions. For example, 85% of mothers say they daily help their child enjoy learning, compared to 75% of fathers. Similarly, 81% of mothers say they daily teach their child social skills, compared to 65% of fathers.

**Race/ethnicity**—African American parents are more likely to do these asset-building than white parents. (Sample sizes on other groups are too small to make comparisons.) For example, African American parents are more likely than white parents to say they daily teach their child to get along with people of races or backgrounds



different than their own (82% vs. 70%), to encourage their child to help others (62% vs. 43%), and to encourage other trusted adults to spend time with their child (60% vs. 37%).

**Partner relationship**—Parents are more likely to engage in these actions if they report having an excellent relationship with their spouse or parenting partner. (It is important to note here that levels of asset-building actions do not vary significantly by either marital status or family composition.) Two actions with the greatest difference between parents who report an excellent partner relationship and those who don't are to encourage religious involvement (37% daily vs. 29% for all other parents) and to encourage helping others (51% daily vs. 43% for other parents).

**Religion**—Parents who attend religious services at least weekly are more likely to report doing these asset-building actions than those who attend less frequently or never. Similarly, Catholic and Protestant Christians are more likely to report these actions than those with no religious preference. (Sample sizes were too small to compare perspectives of parents affiliated with other religious traditions.) Not surprisingly, the action with the greatest difference between more and less religious parents is ensuring religious involvement, which 43% of parents who attend religious services weekly say they do daily, compared to 12% of those parents who rarely attend services. There is also a difference, though less pronounced, on encouraging other adults to spend time with one's child. Among parents who attend religious services weekly,

43% say they do this daily, compared to 35% of parents who attend rarely or never.

**Life stage**—This survey did not focus specifically on the ages of a parent's children, since many parents (about two-thirds in this sample) have more than one child. However, among the 444 parents with only one child, parents with 5- to 10-year-olds reported doing these asset-building actions more than parents of 16- to 18-year-olds. Differences with other age groups were not significant. In addition, parents who are younger (age 18 to 34) were more likely to report doing these actions than older parents.

### Spending Time with Kids

Spending time with children is an important part of their development. As Halle (2002) writes, "It is during this time that children benefit from important emotional supports and exposure to parental values and behaviors" (p. 26).

Figure 11

### Differences in Time Spent with Children

Percentage of parents in this sample who say they spend at least an hour talking, playing, or just being with their child on an average school day.

	All	67%
Gender	Female	72%
	Male	60%
Education	Some college or less	72%
	College or more	62%
Parent's age	18 to 34 years old	75%
	35 to 44 years old	72%
	45 and older	62%
Family income	Less than \$50,000 per year	73%
	Between \$50,000 and \$74,999	65%
	\$75,000 or more per year	68%
Race/ethnicity	African American	79%
	White	66%

Most of the parents in our survey indicate that they spend at least one hour a day talking, playing, or just being with their child “on an average school day.” Of these, 39% say they spend more than 2 hours per day doing these things with their children. At the same time, about one in three (31%) say they spend less than an hour a day doing these things with their child. As shown in Figure 11, the parents surveyed are more likely to spend more time with their children if they are younger, less educated, are African American (compared to whites), and are mothers (compared to fathers). Parents making less than \$25,000 per year also are somewhat more likely than those making \$50,000 or more per year to spend more time with their child.

Though the specific amounts of time vary, these patterns are similar to and different from representative data compiled by Child Trends (Halle, 2002). Its analysis of the *Panel Study of Income Dynamics—Child Development Supplement, 1997* found that, with the exception of fathers in single-parent families, the average parent spends more than an hour per day with her or his children (when the children are 13 and younger; our sample includes parents of adolescents). Among two-parent families, the average mother spends 2:21 hours, and the average father spends 1:46 hours. In single-parent families, the average mother spends 1:16 hours, compared

## The Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition

### Helping Parents Become Even More Effective

In Colorado, parents and educators have been working together since 1980 for parents to be more involved in their children's education. The Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition brings these groups together through workshops, trainings, and conferences. All trainings are available in both English and Spanish, and the coalition customizes trainings to meet the needs of parents and school communities.

In July 2001, the coalition opened the Center for Effective Parent Involvement in Public Education to increase the academic achievement of students by developing even more effective partnerships between home and school. The primary goal of the Center for Effective Parent Involvement in Public Education is to close the achievement gap and increase graduation rates for students from cultural groups that historically have had little voice in the schools.

Popular programs of the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition include:

- Los Padres, a 42-hour training program that connects fathers with their families in a more meaningful way;
- Los Madres, a program that is based on the same curriculum as Los Padres but is offered for mothers;
- Flores Indígenas, a presentation developed by a group of Spanish-speaking mothers that incorporates dance, proverbs, song, and narration to illustrate the power of the 40 developmental assets in transforming lives and giving parents the tools to raise successful children.

“The passion that parents have to improve the quality of education for all children across the state of Colorado coupled with their experience and commitment has ensured the success of the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition,” says Patsy Roybal, senior consultant for the coalition. “We have witnessed firsthand that as parents become more and more engaged in their children's lives, their children experience more and more successes in all areas of their lives.”

to 0:25 hours for fathers. In contrast to our study, Child Trends found that African American parents spend *less* time, on average, than parents from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. However, in an analysis of global data, Larson & Verma (1999) report that children and adolescents of color in the United States and elsewhere spend more time with their families than their white counterparts. They hypothesize that “these differences in family time may reflect differences between collectivist and individualistic values. Family cohesion is a core element of collectivist values, and these values may underlie the high amount of family time among both Asian and African American samples.”

The gap between mothers’ and fathers’ time with children is an important issue to be addressed. Halle (2002) notes that children whose fathers assume at least 40% of family care tasks had greater positive outcomes than those children whose fathers are less involved. Indeed, active involvement of both parents is optimal for children’s growth and development.

## Too Good to Be True?

The relatively high levels for the asset-building actions and the amounts of time parents self-report raise questions in light of the public’s generally negative view of parents. If parents are really doing all of these asset-building actions, why do young people report lower levels of assets than the 75 to 99% of parents who say they do these things at least weekly? In addition, parents’ self-reported feelings of

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**Most parents appear to be doing their best to provide their children with many of the positive experiences that they need to succeed.**

success stand in contrast with the Public Agenda findings of large gaps between traits that are essential to instill in young people and the parents who say they have been successful in doing so (Farkas et al., 2002).

Regarding the contrast in parents’ sense of success between this study and the Public Agenda study, it is important to note the difference in the question. This study asked about how often parents feel successful as parents. In addition, 88% of parents in this poll indicate that they teach their children “basic values such as equality, honesty, and responsibility” daily. In contrast, the Public Agenda asked whether parents has successfully completed the task of instilling various traits and values. Thus, the two studies asked different questions. Fully understanding the connections between these two perspectives would need further analysis or research. However, one hypothesis is that parents are being realistic in knowing that instilling specific values or character traits is a long-term process, and they won’t see the ultimate results until at least young adulthood. At the same time, they feel successful in doing what needs to be done at this particular stage of their child’s development.

In addition, like any study in which people report on their own actions, these data should not be taken at face value. Researchers often find that people over-report doing things that they think are socially desirable (Collins et al., 2000). In addition, there are likely biases in these findings due to the sample for this study. (See Appendix B.) Thus, these findings need to be balanced with other perspectives and

research, including how youth report on their relationship with their parents.

However, while specific percentages are subject to debate and additional research is needed, it is important not to dismiss the overall message: Most parents appear to be doing their best to provide their children with many of the positive experiences that they need to succeed. This message is consistent with other research that shows that the parents of most children are adequately meeting their children's physical, social, and emotional needs.

One way to interpret these findings is that parents' responses indicate that they strongly intend to do things like these for their children. Thus, they may define even a superficial level of these actions as "doing" them. Parents may be confident they are acting in ways that will build these assets in their children, but they may simply not be doing so consistently enough or in the ways that their children see it. While we cannot know from this study what factors may be at play, it is important that we not dismiss parents' perspectives, but rather use them as a starting point for dialogue and further research.

Finally, given the widespread negative perceptions of parents, it is also important to ask whether our skepticism about parents' reports of their parenting grows, in part, out of inaccurate public perceptions or assumptions about parents and parenting. Perhaps the image of parents "not doing their job" reflected in public opinion polls is also distorted. In this case, these findings invite new dialogue on whether society has an overly negative view of—and unreasonable expectations for—how parents can and do contribute to their children's healthy development.

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## Key Finding #4

# Most Parents Polled Face Ongoing Challenges as Parents

Though most parents in this study feel successful as parents, they still face obstacles and challenges. Job demands, sibling rivalry, overscheduling, and the family's financial situation are the factors parents most often say make parenting harder.

Most people agree that parenting is a challenging task. Indeed, American adults overwhelmingly agree (78%) that parenting is a much harder job today than it used to be. Additionally, about one-half (51%) of adults also say it is “very common” to find parents who sacrifice and work hard so that their kids can have a better life (Farkas & Johnson, 1997).

Indeed, reading some of the studies of parents would give the impression that parenting is primarily an uphill battle. The perceived stresses come from both the dynamics of the relationship with the child (or, especially, the teenager) as well as the burden of protecting the child from the world around them. As Farkas et al. (2002) summarized, “According to parents, there are just too many dangers, too many temptations and too many harmful influences for them to be able to relax” (p. 9).

Though most of the parents we surveyed indicated that they do many things that contribute to their children's healthy development and most feel successful much of the time (as highlighted in Finding #3), they still face obstacles as parents. However, because our study emphasizes the strengths of families and the positive benefits of community connections, the level of concern and focus seems less pronounced than in other studies. Further exploration and dialogue is needed to determine whether our study underplays parents' sense of challenge, or whether other study's heavy focus on the negatives of parenting have overplayed the challenge.

For the parents we surveyed, the obstacles they face are part of the daily task of parenting (such as sibling rivalry) as well as larger societal issues (such as financial hardship and work demands). In addition, parents' specific situations shape the challenges they face. For example, unmarried parents in this study report different challenges than those reported by married parents. This finding examines some of the areas where the parents surveyed face challenges and obstacles as parents.

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**Job demands and bickering among their children are the top things that these parents say make parenting harder.**

Figure 12

## What Makes Parenting Harder?

How much the parents in this poll said each factor made their job as parent harder.

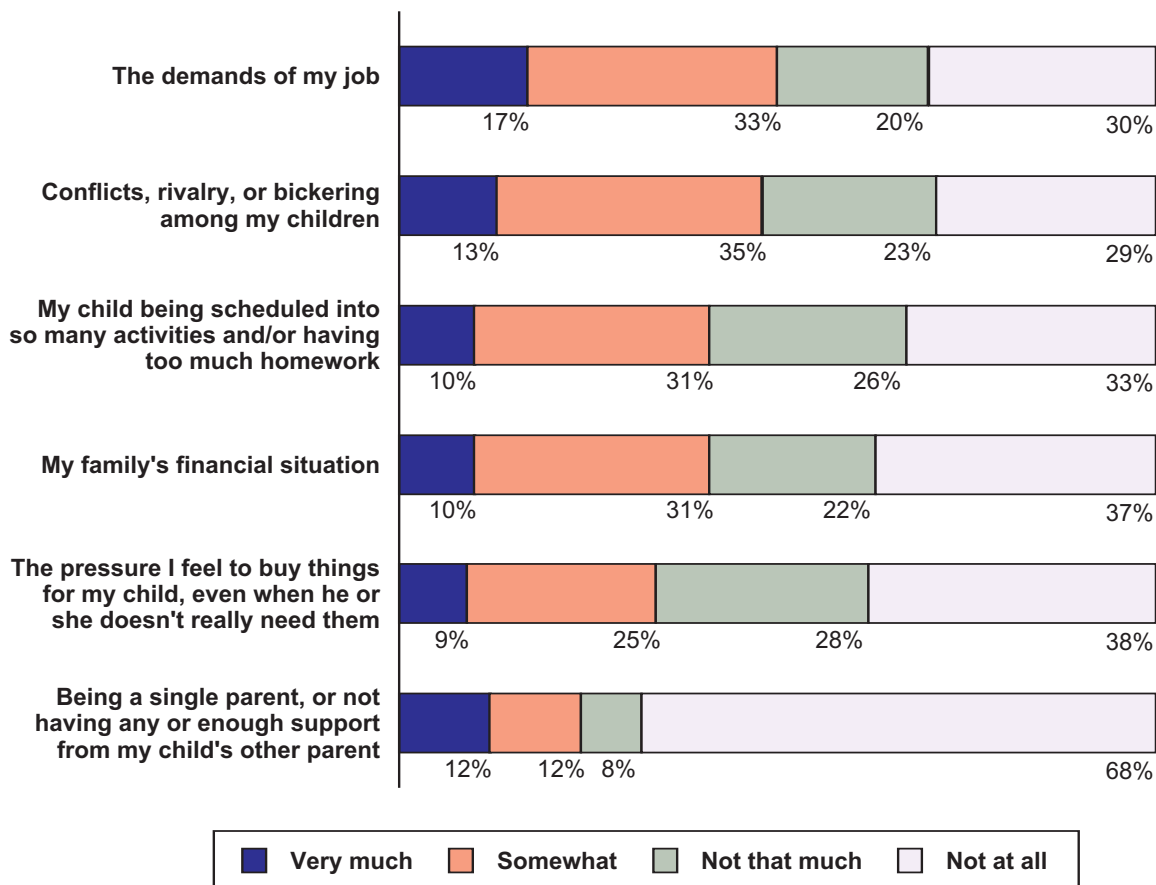


Figure 13

## Parenting Challenges, by Marital Status and Financial Situation

Parents who say each factor makes their job as parents "very much" or "somewhat" harder.

	All	Marital Status		Felt Financial Stress*		
		Married	Unmarried	Hard	Enough	No Problem
Job demands	50%	50%	52%	59%	55%	45% <sup>††</sup>
Sibling rivalry/conflict	48%	49%	45%	54%	53%	43% <sup>††</sup>
Overscheduling/homework	41%	42%	37%	47%	46%	37% <sup>†</sup>
Family financial situation	41%	38%	61% <sup>†††</sup>	77%	56%	25% <sup>†††</sup>
Pressure to buy things	34%	34%	36%	40%	39%	29% <sup>††</sup>
Single parent/little support	24%	18%	55% <sup>†††</sup>	52%	27%	18% <sup>†††</sup>

\* Based on parents' selection of one: (a) I have a hard time buying the things my family needs; (b) I have just enough money for the things my family needs; or (c) I have no problem buying the things my family needs, and we can also buy special things.

Significant differences: † p≤.05 †† p≤.01 ††† p≤.0001



## What Makes Parenting Challenging?

This poll asked parents about how much harder various issues make it to be a parent. Out of the six potential obstacles named, job demands and bickering among their children are the top things that these parents say make parenting harder, with about half of the parents surveyed saying these issues made parenting “very much” or “somewhat” difficult (Figure 12). Not far behind (but under 50%) are children being overscheduled or having a lot of homework and the family’s financial situation, both of which about two out of five parents said make being a parent very much or somewhat harder.

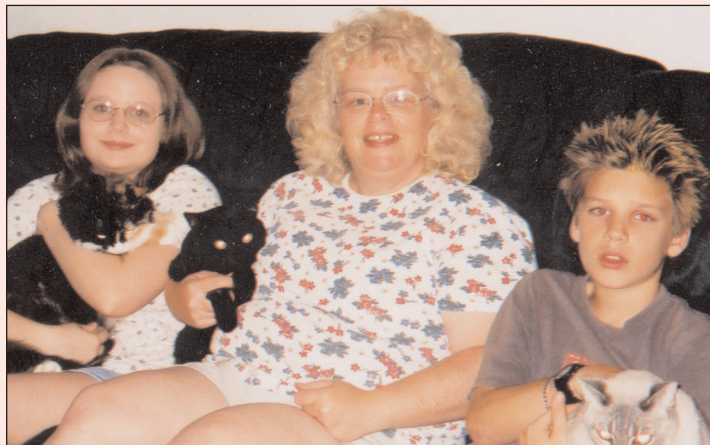
These findings highlight slightly different challenges than have been addressed in other polls of parents. For example, a study by the National Parenting Association, which asked parents about their biggest daily challenges. Topping their list were instilling moral values (30%) and balancing work and family (29%) (Charney Research, 2000). Similarly, a Public Agenda survey that focused on things that parents “worry about” for their children, pointed to a barrage of harmful messages and influences in society that cause more worry than household finances or lack of family time (Farkas et al., 2002).

Unique to our survey is the relatively high ranking of sibling conflicts and bickering as a source of challenge. Whereas many other surveys have emphasized the external challenges that parents face in “shielding” their children from danger or negative influences, pressures, or expectations, this survey also notes that dynamics within the family can also contribute to parents’ challenges.

### The Mills Family in Florida

#### A Strong Advocate

With two children with special needs, Shirley Mills finds herself constantly educating others about her kids and advocating for them. “I’ve had a lot of conferences with teachers, and most teachers don’t understand my kids,” she says. “Over the years, I’ve become more vocal. I’ve had to fight for them because so many people don’t understand them and don’t like what they’re doing.”



Both her children, now 13 and 14, take classes for people with emotional handicaps. Both have been classified as having emotional problems, but their needs are different. She says one does better academically than the other, who struggles more with school but has better social skills.

As her children grow and develop, Mills says she also has grown. “I started out very naive,” she says. “I never used to feel effective. Now I’m more confident in myself. So when people say something about my kids, I say they’ve come a long way, and I tell them how.”

## Differences among Parents

The overall patterns in our poll mask differences in experiences for some groups of parents. For example, instead of conflicts among siblings and job demands topping the list, the major challenges for single parents in this study are “being single, or not having enough support from my child’s other parent” and “my family’s financial situation.” (See Figure 13.) Those who say they “have a hard time buying things their family needs” report that the family’s financial situation and their job demands are much more likely to be make parenting “much harder” than other groups of parents. Thus, the top three challenges for the overall sample, unmarried parents, and those who experience financial stress are as follows:

Whole Sample	Unmarried Parents	Financially Stressed Parents
1. Job demands	Family financial situation	Family financial situation
2. Sibling rivalry	Single parent/little support	Job demands
3. Overscheduling	Job demands	Sibling rivalry

## Some Parents Face More Challenges

In addition to looking at the differences in the order of challenges across various groups of parents, it is also instructive to examine whether some parents generally experience more of these challenges, on the whole, than other parents. So we combined all six challenges and analyzed which groups of parents are more likely to report that they found these issues make parenting harder.

We found that parents in the study were more likely to experience this set of challenges as parents if they:

- Are unmarried;
- Have a household income of less than \$50,000 per year or report having a hard time financially;
- Have child-care arrangements other than staying at home with their child; or
- Have only a good or fair-to-poor relationship with their spouse or parenting partner.

These differences may point toward deeper challenges that parents face, including inadequate supports and allies in parenting, economic hardship that consumes parents’ energy, and other responsibilities (such as working outside the home or working multiple jobs) that make parenting harder. Additional dialogue around these issues is important for understanding the realities of their particular situations.

## The Time Challenge

Though it ranks fairly high in the order of challenges from which parents chose in this poll, is important to note that fewer than half of the parents surveyed indicate that this overscheduling makes their parenting harder. It is likely, however, that the combination of children’s scheduling with work demands contribute to what has been called “hyper-parenting” (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2001). Similarly, as Daly (2001)

suggests, a variety of social changes have “contributed to a growing feeling of time urgency in families” (p. 285), including the increase in mothers and wives in the paid labor force, the combined increase of men and women’s hours working, and an escalation of overwork among people in managerial and professional positions. Indeed, while employed parents are likely spending, on average, *more* time with their children than 20 years ago, they have significantly less time for themselves (Bond et al., 1998). In addition, people who are overworked tend to feel less successful in their relationships with their spouse or partner, children, and friends. They also tend to neglect taking care of themselves (Galinsky et al., 2001).

Whereas there are questions about whether most children and adolescents are over-programmed in the United States (see, for example, Larson & Verma, 1999), there is compelling evidence that parents generally feel the time pinch that has been brought on by societal changes, including changes in the paid labor forces as well as what appears to be a greater reliance on parents on their own to provide support and care for their children—with less and less engagement from extended family, neighbors, and friends and as family life has become separated and “privatized,” rather than integrated into work and community (Daly, 2001). Indeed, a Gallup poll of U.S. adults found that parents of young children are the most stressed American adults with the least leisure time, with working mothers being the most stretched (Jones, 2002).

This time crunch appears to have more impact on parents’ own well-being and their

## The Beaver Community in Pennsylvania

### Forming a Parent Alliance against Underage Drinking

Alarmed by the rise in underage drinking and many parents’ lax attitude about the problem, concerned parents and citizens in the Beaver area of Pennsylvania got together to see what they could do. After much discussion, they created a parents’ pledge outlining how to promote the well-being of their teenagers and a responsible homes directory that listed all the parents who had signed the pledge.

"As parents, we wanted to support one another," says Ruth Briceland, who was instrumental in creating the pledge and directory as the community coordinator for the Beaver Area School District. "We also wanted to send a strong message to our kids."

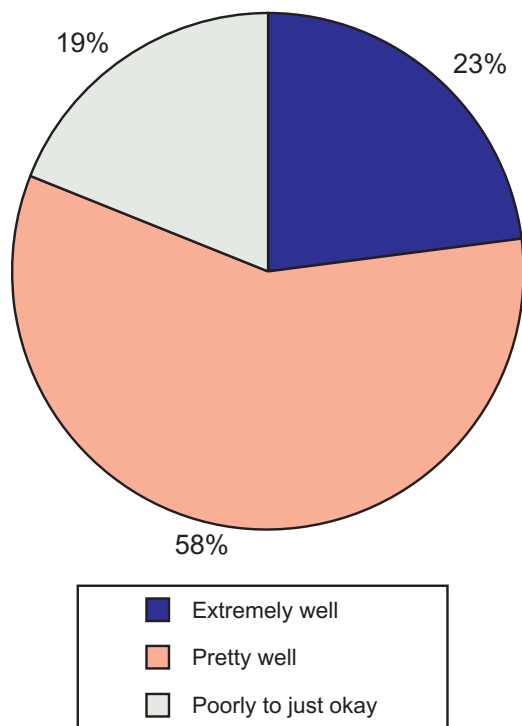
By signing the pledge, parents say they will not serve alcoholic beverages or illegal substances to teenagers or permit them to be consumed by teenagers in their home. They encourage other parents to call about details of an upcoming party or gathering at their home. They also agree to ask neighbors and/or the community police to monitor their home if they will be out of town while their teenage children stay at home.

With the third year of the pledge and directory under way, community residents have noticed changes. Teenagers no longer bring alcohol onto school premises, and parents are talking about the issue more. "Parents now have the support. Our kids now have the support," Briceland says. "It's a broad boundary, but it's an important boundary. We believe it's the community's responsibility to take care of our kids."

Figure 14

### How Well These Parents Believe They Handle Daily Challenges of Parenting

How well the parents surveyed say they deal with the daily issues and challenges that come with being a parent.



relationship with their partner than it has directly on their children (though, as noted in Key Finding #2, the partner relationship can be a vital resource for parenting). Daly notes that, when push comes to shove, “parents’ needs and satisfactions were secondary to an assessment of what was important for their children” (p. 291). Indeed, Daly found that parents tend to see personal and couple time as being “at the expense of the family” (p. 292), not a way to strengthen family for everyone, including the children. Thus, the overall time crunch that many parents experience affects their parenting and their kids.

### Dealing with the Daily Challenges of Parenting

It is one thing to say you experience certain challenges as a parent. It is also important to know how well parents feel they are doing at meeting the challenges of parenting. Though this study did not specifically ask parents about how well they meet each of the challenges outlined

### Parenting after the 9-11 Attacks

This survey was conducted in May 2002, approximately nine months following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While three out of four parents surveyed indicated that their role as parents has not changed since the attacks, a substantial minority of parents—one in four—said that the attacks changed them as parents. In response to an open-ended question, parents were most likely to report that they:

- Are more careful about their children’s safety (7% of all respondents);
- Appreciate their children more (4%);
- Explain things differently to their children (4%);
- Keep their children closer to home (4%); and
- Spend more time with their kids (3%).

These figures are lower than many areas of impact that have been reported in other studies that were completed within the first year following the terrorist attacks (see, for example, Horatio Alger Association, 2001; Schlenger et al., 2002). This difference may be due, in part, to the fact that many of these parents believe they were already actively engaged with their kids before the attacks. It may also be that many other aspects of people’s lives were more directly affected, so they did not perceive changes in their parenting as significant.

in Figure 12, it asked a broad question about how well parents feel they “deal with the daily issues and challenges that come with being a parent.”

As shown in Figure 14, only about one out of four parents in this survey (23%) say they do extremely well in dealing with the daily challenges. Most (58%) say they do pretty well. One in five (19%) say they do poorly or “just okay.”

The following groups of parents are more likely to say that they deal well with the challenges:

- Those who say they “have no problem buying the things my family needs, and we can also buy special things” (compared to those who say their family struggles financially).
- Protestants more than people with no religious preference.
- Those with an excellent relationship with their spouse or parenting partner.
- African American parents (compared to white parents).

Several differences among parents in this sample who say they handle the daily challenges of parenting “extremely well” are noteworthy. For example, African American parents are about twice as likely as white parents to say they handle the daily challenges extremely well (43% vs. 20%).

Similarly, those parents who report an excellent partner relationship are almost twice as likely as those with a fair or poor relationship to report that they handle the challenges of parenting extremely well (28% vs. 15%). (See Key Finding #2.)

Further exploration is needed to uncover the sources of strength for parents that appear to be available for African American parents and for those parents with a strong partner relationship. In addition, particular attention needs to be paid to understanding, supporting, and equipping those parents who feel less competent in dealing with the daily challenges of parenting.

## Sources of Dissatisfaction with Parenting

In addition to asking about specific challenges they face in parenting, we asked parents to indicate how much three different factors contributed to their not feeling satisfied with their parenting: feeling overwhelmed, not having enough support, and feeling unprepared for the situation. Of these options, feeling unprepared for

Figure 15

### What Contributes to Dissatisfaction?

Percentage of parents who say each issue contributed “very much” or “somewhat” to a time when they were not satisfied with what they did as a parent.

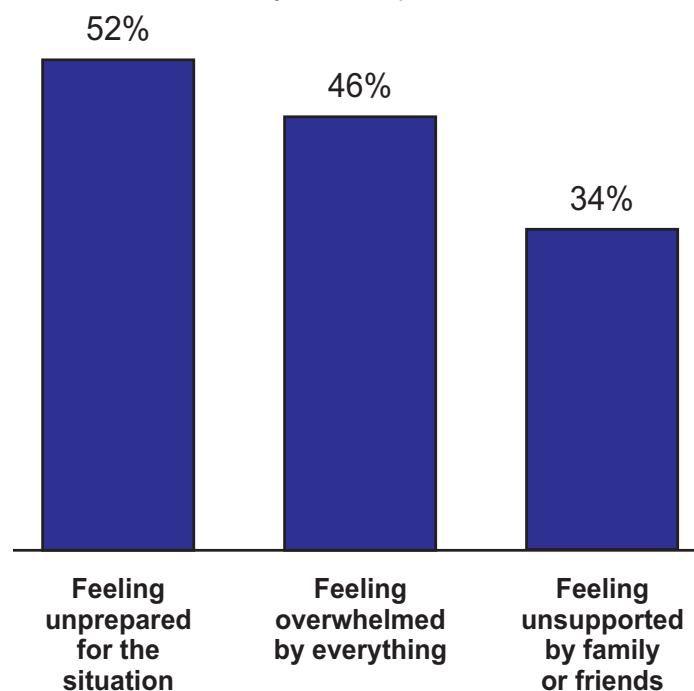




Figure 16

## Feeling Overwhelmed

Parents in the study who say “feeling overwhelmed by everything” is very much or somewhat a source of dissatisfaction as a parent.

### Gender

Mothers	51%
Fathers	44%

### Marital status

Married	44%
Unmarried	54%

### Economic stress\*

Hard time	60%
Just enough	48%
No problem	42%

\*Based on parents' selection of one: (a) I have a hard time buying the things my family needs; (b) I have just enough money for the things my family needs; or (c) I have no problem buying the things my family needs, and we can also buy special things.

the situation is the most common reason for parents' dissatisfaction, as shown in Figure 15. Close behind is feeling overwhelmed by everything.

Though most of these parents do not actively seek support from others for parenting (as highlighted in Key Finding #1), most do not perceive a lack of support from family and friends as a major source of their dissatisfaction with their parenting. This apparent contradiction may reflect the reality that parents are not expecting a lot of support from others, so they do not see the lack of it as a significant problem. Or they may not seek support because they believe they will be judged, not supported. Instead, they attribute their dissatisfaction to factors that are their own responsibility: feeling overwhelmed or unprepared. It is important to note, however, that a family's web of support can be a valuable resource for addressing both of these sources of dissatisfaction.

The perceptions regarding each of the three sources of dissatisfaction are fairly consistent across all the groups of parents included in this study, though there were also some differences for each of the sources of dissatisfaction.

In the area of *feeling unprepared*, parents whose child still needs child care (i.e., those with younger children) were more likely to feel unprepared. These parents of younger children

may often feel unprepared because they have had less experience in the parenting role.

Several different subgroups of parents were more likely than others to feel dissatisfied because they are *overwhelmed*. (See Figure 16.) Some groups that are more likely to attribute their dissatisfaction to being overwhelmed include the following:

- Unmarried parents more than married parents.
- Those with only some college education more than college graduates (not shown).
- Those having “a hard time buying the things my family needs” more than those who say they have “no problem buying the things my family needs, and we can also buy special things.”
- Mothers more than fathers.
- Those with a fair or poor relationship with their spouse or partner, compared to those with an excellent relationship (not shown).
- Parents of 11- to 15-year-olds more than those of 5- to 10-year-olds (among the sample of 444 parents with only one child) (not shown).

Each of these differences points to logical reasons for increased stress. Being unmarried or having a poor relationship with a spouse may leave a parent feeling unsupported. Lower education and financial challenges clearly add to the stresses

## The du Saire–Wieber Family of Minnesota

### Parenting and Changing Priorities

Martin du Saire never planned to be a stay-at-home dad, but that's what he has been doing since April. His youngest daughter, Anna, now 2½, had a liver transplant. The successful operation has meant that Anna takes seven different medications each day, needs to stay within four hours of the hospital at all times, and needs to be kept at home until her immune system is working well again.

Twice Anna has been hospitalized since April for viruses, which give her high fevers. In the past few months, however, she has been healthy, and she seems more resilient. Still, her parents worry that a simple cold or flu could send her back to the hospital.

Anna was born without a biliary tree, which provides the drainage and delivery of bile from the liver into the intestine. Soon after her birth, Anna had surgery to connect the liver directly to her intestines, but her family knew Anna would need a liver transplant when she was older. "She's healthy, and the future looks good," du Saire says.

All four members of the family are bilingual in English and Spanish, including Anna who easily shifts from English to Spanish. Du Saire grew up in Costa Rica, and he met his wife, Kim Wieber, in Costa Rica when they were both teaching there. (She was teaching at an English Immersion School while he taught high school math, physics, and physical science.) They married, and Emily was born in Costa Rica. When Emily was 2, the family moved to the United States.

Now du Saire is working on his master's thesis, although he admits that progress has been slow since Anna's transplant in April. "It took me a while to figure out that I just needed to let it go when they're up and about," he said. "That relieved a lot of stress for me—and for them." When Emily gets on the bus for afternoon kindergarten, du Saire puts Anna down for a nap. Then he gets about two hours to work on his thesis, when Anna is asleep. Otherwise, he works on his thesis in the evening after dinner when his wife is home to put the kids to bed.

"Parenting has given me a purpose," du Saire says. "Anything else I do is kind of a function of them. If I succeed at work, it's a benefit for them." Du Saire says when he was younger, he dreamed of being a famous physicist, but "priorities change," he says. "All your decisions now take into account these two girls."



of life, much less parenting. Mothers typically have greater parenting responsibility in this society. And the rapid growth during early adolescence (ages 10 to 15) can be a particularly challenging time for parents.

In their study of parents, Farkas et al. (2002) identified "parent archetypes," of which four emerged from the data. One of the four was the overwhelmed parent—"parents who feel stressed and not in control of how their child turns out" (p. 24).<sup>\*</sup> In their study, about one in five parents (17%) fell in this category. They say "that 'there's so much stress in my life that being a parent can be overwhelming'; that 'I

<sup>\*</sup> The other three archetypes that emerged from the data were the "softies," who tend to give in and look the other way; the "parents in chief," who "run a tight parenting ship"; and the "best buddies," who want to think of themselves as their child's best friend.



can see how my child has picked up some bad habits from me;’ and that ‘children are born with their own personality—as a parent there’s only so much I can do’ ” (p. 24). The overwhelmed in Farkas’s study are more likely than other parents to worry about their children and to experience problems with their child.

Finally, in the area of *lack of support* from family and friends, African American parents were more likely than white parents to see a lack of support as a source of dissatisfaction. Overall, 49% of African American parents say a lack of support from family and friends is very much or somewhat a source of dissatisfaction, compared to 32% of white parents. Furthermore, as noted in Key Finding #1, African American parents are twice as likely as white parents to seek support from community resources.

Given the historic strength of the African American community in a sense of shared responsibility for raising the young (Olson & DeFrain, 1994; Phinney et al., 2000), this finding seems counterintuitive. It may be that the particular characteristics of the sample in this poll skewed this result. Or it may be that African American parents are more likely to point to this gap because it is something they have historically expected or relied upon, but experience it less frequently now than in the past. In contrast, white parents may not perceive the lack of support to be a source of dissatisfaction because they don’t expect it.

## **Addressing the Challenges**

The challenges and obstacles highlighted in this finding provide a helpful context for understanding the realities of building family strengths. Though, as noted throughout this report, parents in all types of families and communities exhibit strengths as parents, they also deal with the inevitable challenges in parenting.

Certain groups of parents clearly face more challenges, including those with weaker relationships with their spouse or parenting partner, those who are unmarried, and those with fewer financial resources. Each of these factors points to gaps in social and economic resources that add to the parenting challenge. Strengthening these resources can make a positive difference in helping parents face the challenges that come their way. In the process, it is important also to tap the strengths and resources that these parents *do* have (see, for example, Key Finding #3) and the resources they would value (Key Finding #5) as starting points for addressing the challenges that today’s parents face.

## Key Finding #5

# Many Things Parents Say Would Help Them Are Easy for Others to Do

Parents in this poll indicate that they value many simple ways that others can support them as parents, including advice from professionals in their community, affirmation for their parenting, other trusted adults spending time with their kids, and talking with other parents. However, parents facing financial stress say a more flexible work schedule would help them most as parents.

Adults—parents and nonparents alike—agree that parenting is a challenging task. And though this society may generally expect parents to have sole responsibility for raising their children, the evidence is clear that parents need the support of others and from their communities to be most effective as parents. And while parents are doing many things that contribute to their children’s growth and development, they are ready for and open to support and help.

Too often, though, efforts to support and equip parents start with what people (especially professionals) think parents need, not with what parents value or want. So while we were not able to explore all possible areas where parents would value support, we asked parents about what kinds of supports in their community would help them in their parenting. The results suggest that parents may be more interested in building their informal, relational network of support, advice, and encouragement than in utilizing formal programs, services, and resources—as valuable as those may be. Their perspectives offer starting points for communities, neighbors, family support organizations, and other organizations for examining how they could be—or already are—responsible to the needs, interests, and priorities of parents.

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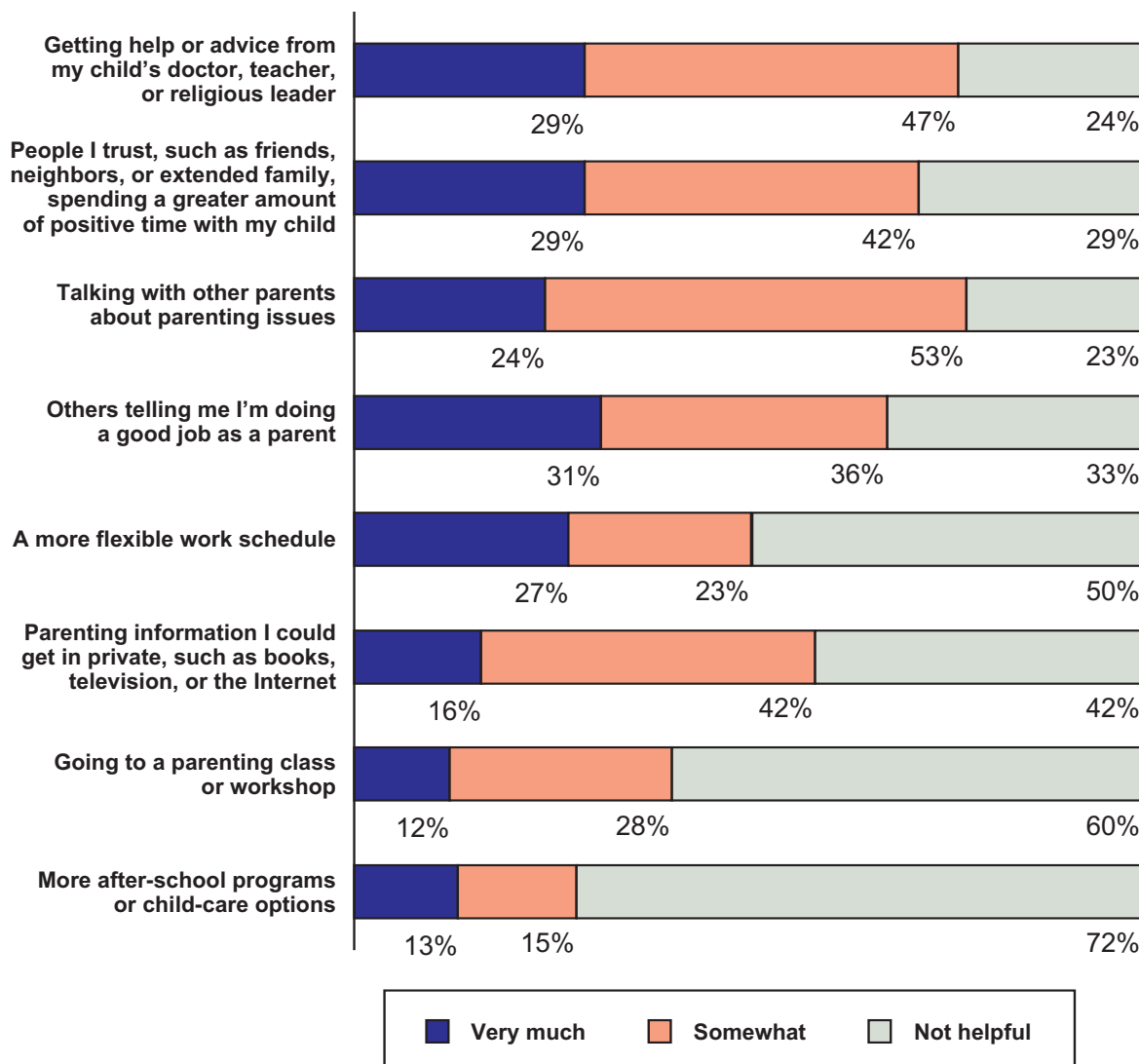
**Parents may be more interested in building their informal, relational network of support, advice, and encouragement than in utilizing formal programs, services, and resources—as valuable as those may be.**

## What Parents Say Would Really Help Them

As shown in Figure 17, there are a number of things that parents say would “really help” them as parents “very much” or “somewhat.” The things they think would help them the most are not all expensive or time-consuming. Most emphasize informal supports that can be provided by family and friends. They include:

Figure 17

## How Much Would These Help You as a Parent?



Items are ordered based on mean score from highest mean to lowest mean.

- Getting parenting advice from their doctors, their child's teachers, and their religious leaders.
- People they trust—including friends, neighbors, and extended family—spending a greater amount of positive time with their kids.
- Talking with other parents about parenting issues.
- People telling them they're doing a good job as a parent.
- A more flexible work schedule.

At least one in four parents say that each of these opportunities would help them “very much.” In contrast, only about one in 10 say going to parenting classes or

workshops or having more after-school programs or child-care options would help them “very much.” (An additional 15% say that after-school and child care programs would help them at least “somewhat.”) But among the people who most need such programs, support is much higher (see p. 51).

**Advice from other parents and trusted professionals**—When it comes to getting parenting help or advice, parents say that they value input from both trusted professionals in their community and friends or peers. Three-fourths of those surveyed (76%) say that advice from “my child’s doctor, teacher, or religious leader” would help very much or somewhat. And 77% indicate that “talking with other parents about parenting issues” would help somewhat or very much.

What kind of advice do parents want? When asked that in an open-ended question, the three most common responses parents gave were:

- How to understand and deal with teenagers.

## The Yancy Family in Minnesota

### Creating Your Own Extended Family

When Eric Yancy and his wife decided to raise Yancy’s 12-year-old brother, Yancy quickly realized they couldn’t do it alone. The boy was skipping school, running away from home, and stealing bikes.

In his monthly meeting with four professional men who gave each other career support, Yancy told them about his brother. “They made a commitment right there that they would be involved in every turn of his life,” Yancy says. When Yancy was traveling on business, these men would step in and attend school conferences, spend time with the boy, and give Yancy’s wife the support she needed. “They became the strong uncles,” Yancy says, “and they were right there.”

Yancy decided to nurture his family in this way and build on it. Today he calls 18 people his extended family, and only two of these people are biologically related. All of the Yancy kids (who range in age from 3 to 27 with five of the seven still living at home) select whom to include in their extended family. The kids discuss who is authentically concerned about them, and they choose new aunts and uncles based on consensus.

“My 13-year-old wanted to learn how to fish, and I didn’t know how to fish,” Yancy says. “I had never fished, and, frankly, I never wanted to.” One man took Yancy’s son fishing offshore. Another man in his 60s took him fishing in a boat. By connecting his son with adults who had a passion for fishing, Yancy helped his son acquire a new hobby and new mentors.

“We need adults who are involved in our kids’ lives who are with them, doing activities together,” Yancy says. “Although parents have a major influence on kids, parents aren’t enough.” That’s why Yancy gets involved in the lives of other kids he knows and advocates that parents surround their kids with an extended network of support.



- How to have patience and understanding with their children.
- Opportunities to learn from parents who have been in similar situations.

**Other adult engagement with their kids**—A great deal of research in recent years has highlighted the importance of having multiple caring, responsible adults from outside the family engaged in the lives of young people (Scales, in press; Scales & Leffert, 1999). But while most American adults and youth believe it's important for adults to be engaged in the lives of kids, Search Institute research has found that most adults are not actively involved with kids outside their family. One of the reasons for this lack of involvement appears to be that they aren't sure whether a child's parents want them involved.

This study gives strong evidence that parents truly do value the involvement of adults they trust in the lives of their children, with almost three-fourths of parents (71%) believing that such involvement would help them somewhat or very much as parents. Indeed, when asked which one of these resources would help them the most, "having people I trust . . . spend a greater amount of positive time with my

kids" was their top choice, with 24% of parents selecting it from all eight options.

This level of priority appears to be particularly high among white parents, with 25% selecting this as their top choice, compared to 14% of African American parents. This difference may reflect more pressing needs facing communities of color, but it may also reflect the lack of a historic sense of "village" and shared responsibility within the U.S. Anglo and Euro-American culture. In addition, it may also reflect other priorities among African American parents, many of whom may already feel they have adequate support networks.

Parents' expressed interest in other adults' engagement with their children is striking in light of another recent Search Institute national study that focuses on the relationships between young people and adults outside their family. Titled *Grading Grown-Ups 2002*, this study asked both adults and youth about what kinds of actions were important for unrelated adults to do to contribute to young people's healthy development. A majority of both youth

## Project Cornerstone in California

### Connecting Parents in Small Groups

Parents have a new, positive focus for their parenting after participating in parent study groups formed in their Santa Clara Valley, California, schools. One parent started to get to know her son's friends better. Another began talking to the teenage clerk she always saw working at the drugstore. "It's changing their lives. Parents say that," says Linda Silvius, who started these groups. "It's changing how they interact with their kids and in the ways they interact with other people's kids." After facilitating one group, Silvius even flew to Kalispell, Montana, to look up her fifth-grade teacher. "That teacher is 92 now," she said. "I went to visit her to say thank you."

By getting together once every two weeks for six meetings, parents express their hopes and fears for their children while also reflecting on the way they grew up. They discuss how they support their kids, set and enforce boundaries, teach values, and more. "It's giving them the confidence to do the little things that really make a difference," Silvius says. Parents slow down and become more intentional about talking with their kids and doing meaningful activities. They also begin to notice the adults who are contributing to their children's lives. Parent Colleen Hirano wrote to her 11-year-old daughter's figure-skating coach. "I expressed my appreciation for her being part of my daughter's life," she says, "and the tremendous role she plays."

and adults said it was important for adults outside young people's families to encourage school success, teach shared values (such as honesty, equality, and responsibility), and teach respect for cultural differences. However, the study also found a large gap between what people said was important and what they actually did. For example, while 73% of adults said it was "most important" for adults to teach shared values, only 58% of adults say that they and adults they know actually teach shared values (Scales et al., 2002).

Furthermore, it appears that one of the major reasons other adults *do not* get involved with children and youth is that parents are not communicating their interest. About half of the adults surveyed (49%) indicated that they rarely or never asked parents for guidance for how to get involved, and 29% of parents indicated that they rarely or never advise neighbors or other adults on how to engage with their children. The researchers conclude: "Clearly, most adults experience relatively weak social expectations and little or no encouragement to be involved with other people's kids in ways that promote the positive development of children and youth. But when adults do ask parents for engagement guidance, those adults report being more connected with kids" (p. 5).

**Talking with other parents**—Three out of four of the parents surveyed (77%) said that talking to other parents about parenting issues would help them very much or somewhat. This desire is striking in that, as we learned in Key Finding #1, only 20% of parents said it was "very true" that they turn to friends for advice and support in parenting. It suggests that parents may value this informal support, but too many do not feel comfortable (or have opportunities for) talking with other parents.

**Affirmation**—It is somewhat surprising that being affirmed rises to the top of things that parents say would really help them as parents. This desire is true across all groups of parents, regardless of marital status, income, or race/ethnicity. (One important difference is that mothers are more likely to value this affirmation than fathers. Seventy-three percent of mothers say that this affirmation would really help, compared to 56% of fathers.)

This overall high perceived value of being affirmed as parents likely reflects at least three dynamics that merit further study and dialogue:

- It can be difficult to have perspective on how you're doing as a parent in the midst of the daily ebb and flow of life. And sometimes the results of parents' efforts don't become evident until several years later.
- If parents feel alone in the parenting task, they are unlikely to have people who can reflect with them about how it's going and what they're doing well.
- The overall negative perceptions of parents and lack of attention to parenting strengths that were highlighted in the introduction to Key Finding #3 likely leave parents second-guessing themselves and believing that, despite their best efforts, they really are not doing well. In reporting on a Search Institute qualitative study of families in two distressed communities, Saito et al. (2000) noted that "these families were so accustomed to being scrutinized in terms of what they were not doing, or what they were doing wrong, that they didn't even know how much



## The Blecher-Sass Family in New Jersey

### Seeing the Difference between Asking for Support and Expecting It

“There’s a difference between asking for support and expecting support,” says Hope Blecher-Sass, the parent of a 4-year-old and an 8-year-old in New Jersey. “We know parents who expect their parents to do a lot, but grandparents have their own lives, too, and that needs to be respected.”

For Blecher-Sass and her husband, Ray, their extended family and the people they have met through their synagogue have been most supportive. “My parents know what’s going on with my kids,” she says. “My mom calls and wishes my daughter good luck on a test at school.” Her husband’s parents recently immigrated to Toronto from South Africa, so they’re closer, but still they don’t see each other that often. Blecher-Sass’s aunt takes a bus to their house (since she doesn’t drive) to play with the kids.

The extended family really stepped in when her daughter became seriously ill in first grade and missed 30 days of school. “I took off one day a week,” she said. “My husband did some, but he had just started a new job after being laid off. My father worked two days a week out of our house. My cousin Rachel came and helped out with the other times.”



Suffering from bronchitis and pneumonia, her daughter worried that her friends at school would forget her. Blecher-Sass talked with the teacher about the situation, and the kids made cards. She said the school provided a daily tutor so that her daughter wouldn’t get behind, and the school principal and nurse also were supportive. “The connection was there so that when she returned, she fit right back in,” she says.

“With all the nutty, horrible things that are on the news, there’s a sense to be more protective,” Blecher-Sass says. “But my kids also need to learn how to be in the world. It’s tempting to always take them from place to place to ensure they’re always safe, but we need to teach kids how they can protect themselves.” She says the family lives 12 houses from school, and many of the neighbors drive the kids to school because of fear, but she lets her daughter walk with a neighbor.

“I feel I’m more of an advocate for them now,” she says about parenting her kids now compared to when they were younger. “I make sure they’re comfortable with what they’re doing and challenge them to try new things.”

they were doing well on behalf of their children” (p. 5).

In the same way that there’s a growing call for people to “catch kids doing something right,” this finding reinforces the importance of focusing much more attention on highlighting the many ways parents are doing things well, both individually and collectively. Such efforts not only could begin shifting public perceptions but also could help to re-energize parents and reinforce their positive efforts.



**Work flexibility**—Balancing work and family appears to be an ongoing challenge for the parents we surveyed. As noted in Key Finding #4, 50% of parents (including both those who are working and not working) indicate that “job demands” make parenting more difficult. It is not surprising, then, that 50% of parents also say that a more flexible work schedule would help them as parents very much or somewhat.

Work flexibility is particularly valued by those in more difficult economic circumstances. Among those parents who say they struggle financially, 40% say that a more flexible work schedule would help them very much, compared to just 22% of those who say that they don’t have financial struggles.

## **Formal Opportunities: Lower Priorities, But Valued by Many**

At first glance, the findings from this poll could be interpreted as reason to abandon formal programs and resources for parents. After all, the things that parents say would help them the most are generally relationship-based, not programmatic. And the common emphasis on training or workshops stands in contrast to the low ranking that these opportunities receive from parents. However, though parents clearly value the informal supports, many—particularly those in more challenging situations—indicate that they value many formal sources of support as well.

**Information for private use**—The lower ratings for information for use in private (books, television, or the Internet) is a reminder that information by itself is not as powerful as information within the context of relationship. It is important to recognize, however, that a majority of the parents surveyed (58%) said that such information is at least “somewhat” useful. Furthermore, unmarried parents and those facing financial stress appear to particularly value this type of information. (See Figure 18.) However, this private information is likely best viewed as supplementary, not as a substitute for information and support that are shared through dialogue and relationships.

**After-school and child care**—On the surface, the relatively low ratings for “more child-care and after-school options” appear to contradict the current emphasis in public policy and program development on ensuring that child care and after-school programs are available and affordable. Advocates and researchers point to a wide range of benefits for families and communities for having quality child care and after-school programs (see, for example, Aguilar & Stokley, 2001).

Several factors may be influencing the relatively low rating that after-school programs and child-care options received in this poll.

- The sample underrepresents parents of young children. Indeed, 63% of the parents surveyed indicate that they do not need child care. Only 16% say they use child care. Thus, our poll does not adequately reflect the parents who might be most eager to have more child-care options available. Among those parents who say they need child care, 24% said that more after-school and child care options would help them “very much,” compared to only 10% of other parents.

Figure 18

## Differences in What Parents Value, by Marital Status and Financial Stress

Parents who say each option would help them “very much” as parents.

	All	Marital Status		Family’s Financial Stress*		
		Married	Unmarried	Hard	Enough	No Problem
Advice from doctor, teacher, or religious leader	29%	28%	36% <sup>†</sup>	37%	28%	29%
Trusted adults spending time with my child	29%	28%	36% <sup>†</sup>	35%	32%	27%
Talking with other parents about parenting	24%	23%	29%	28%	23%	23%
Affirmation from others	30%	30%	36%	34%	31%	29%
Flexible work schedule	26%	26%	33%	42%	28%	24% <sup>†††</sup>
Parenting information to use in private	16%	14%	24% <sup>††</sup>	22%	18%	13%
Parenting classes	11%	10%	22% <sup>†††</sup>	21%	12%	10% <sup>†</sup>
More after-school and child-care options	12%	10%	24% <sup>†††</sup>	24%	15%	9% <sup>†††</sup>

\* Based on parents’ selection of one: (a) I have a hard time buying the things my family needs; (b) I have just enough money for the things my family needs; or (c) I have no problem buying the things my family needs, and we can also buy special things.

Significant differences:      † p≤.05                      †† p≤.01                      ††† p≤.0001

- Parents were asked how much these things would help them *with their parenting*. Many parents may not perceive child care or after-school programs as helping them, but as helping their child.

This poll is not the first that places child care or after-school programming as a lower priority for parents. A National Parenting Association poll found that only 5% of parents mentioned “paying for child care” and only 5% mentioned “availability of child care/latchkey children” as one of their three biggest concerns or worries in an open-ended question (Charney Research, 2000). At the same time, other research consistently shows that most American adults believe that quality child-care and after-school opportunities are important needs in this society. For example, a YMCA of the USA poll found that 75% of American adults believe that child care has become a bigger problem than it was 10 years ago, and 83% of adults are worried about the quality of available child care. Furthermore, 43% of parents indicated that their ability to find reliable child care has affected their jobs or businesses (Global Strategy Group, 1998).

In addition, it’s likely that those parents who are either satisfied with their current child care arrangement or those who don’t need child care are less likely to see it as a priority for helping them in their parenting. So while the overall sample of parents in this study places less value on child care and after-school programs, certain

## The Koenig Family in Colorado

### Paving the Way as a New Family

Two years ago, Jan and Greg Koenig got married, merging two families into one. Before that, Jan was a single adoptive parent of one daughter. Greg was divorced and had joint custody of two daughters who also had been adopted. All three daughters were born overseas: two in Russia (although they came from different families) and one from Cambodia.

"There is no family in the book like ours," Jan Koenig says about the fact that none of the parenting, blended family, and adoption books address their unique family situation. Not only do the parents work on creating a new family, but the daughters struggle with different issues. One was sexually abused as a child, and another was physically abused. Adding to the stress is the fact that two of the girls have attachment issues, which is common among older-child adoptions.



"The support I get as a parent is from people who assure me that what I'm going through is so difficult," Koenig says. "The most support I get is when I'm active in church. It's amazing the people who have come out of the woodwork."

Family members see professional therapists on a regular basis to deal with these complex issues as the five adjust to their new roles. For Koenig that meant changing from being a single mom of one daughter to being married and the mother of three daughters. "I've really worked on spending individual time with them," she says of all three daughters. In addition, her husband officially adopted her daughter this year. "So we're all Koenigs," she says.

After the adoption was finalized, Koenig bought three silver rings. She gave one ring to each of Greg's daughters and wears the other ring to show her commitment to them. "I told the girls I loved them and that I had adopted them in my heart," she says. All three wear the rings, and Koenig says seeing the rings reminds her of being bound together.

"When I see behaviors I've been trying to teach reflected back to me by the way they act, then I feel effective," Koenig says. Many days, however, Koenig feels like she's been tested. "I wish I had more peace or assurance that I'm doing the right thing." She adds: "What I've had to work on is figuring out what runs me ragged, even when I'm doing good, loving things," Koenig says. "Without family and church, I would be high and dry."

groups of parents (some of which are underrepresented in our sample) place much higher value on this resource than might be presumed from the overall finding:

- Those parents who say their family is having a hard time financially place a higher value on child care or after-school programs. Among these parents, 24% say it would help them very much, and an additional 18% say it would help somewhat. In comparison, only 9% of those parents who say they are doing well financially say that additional options would help them very much.
- Whereas only 9% of white parents express the need for more child care or after-

school options, 36% of African American parents say that these opportunities would help them very much. More than half of African American parents (58%) say that more child-care and after-school options would help them very much or somewhat, compared to only 22% of white parents.

- Unmarried parents are more than twice as likely as married parents to say that these resources would help them very much (24% vs. 10% of married parents).

In short, the overall low comparative rating for after-school and child-care options should not be interpreted as evidence that quality child-care and after-school programs are not valued by parents or society. Rather, it's important to recognize that, while all parents may not utilize these community resources, they are vital to many families and an important part of societal resources that contribute to young people's healthy development. Furthermore, it also reminds us that focusing all of the available resource on these important, but limited, opportunities would be inadequate to address the diverse needs and priorities of today's families.

**Classes and workshops**—The findings also illustrate the need for diverse strategies for supporting parents. For example, while most particularly value some of the more informal supports, a sizeable minority (40%) of these parents “very much” or “somewhat” value the opportunity for classes or workshops. These percentages are even higher for certain groups:

- African American parents are more likely to say that these opportunities would help them very much or somewhat (49% and 52%, respectively, compared to 28% of white parents).
- Almost half of unmarried parents (47%) would value these opportunities, compared to 38% of married parents.

It's also important to consider whether more intentionally integrating some of the informal things that parents value into classes and workshops would enhance their value to parents. For example, do parents perceive (perhaps based on experience) that learning opportunities are only for dealing with problems or to tell them what they're not doing well? Or, for example, are efforts made in these classes to ensure that parents are affirmed and have opportunities to learn from each other?

## Recognizing Differences in Parents' Priorities

A challenge, of course, in studies that emphasize overall patterns is that they can miss differences in priorities across groups of parents. In examining what parents say would really help them, it's important to recognize that parents have different priorities, depending on their life circumstances.

In short, there is not a single strategy or resource that, if they had it, would meet the needs of all parents. Rather, these findings suggest that, within a community, a wide range of formal and informal supports and opportunities are needed that respond to the life situations and personal styles of diverse parents across the first two decades of life. This study offers a springboard for dialogue with parents about what will best meet their needs and help to strengthen their families.

## Ideas for Action

# Weaving a Community Web of Support for Parents and Families

Friends, neighbors, and community organizations can all take action to support and encourage parents. Here are ideas, based on the findings from the *Building Strong Families* poll and on an asset-building approach to get started in your community.

**B**uilding Strong Families is an invitation to friends, neighbors, organizational leaders, and community leaders to reflect upon the ways they could, or do, support and encourage parents. It is intentionally designed to trigger dialogue and innovation in communities and organizations about how to equip, encourage, and engage parents as active partners in building strong kids and building strong communities.

This section proposes a wide range of ideas for how individuals and organizations can take action to support parents and families. These ideas build on the study's findings as well as other research and theory on asset building and community building. It focuses on individuals and institutions beyond the family. The next section focuses on what people can do within their family.

Undergirding this section is the assumption that parents and their children are better off when others in society share responsibility with parents for nurturing young people and for supporting parents in their primary role. As Cochran and Niego (1995) write: "Although our society expects parents to accept full responsibility for rearing its future workers, citizens, and leaders, . . . we discern the wisdom of an alternative

### Using the Findings from This Study in Your Organization or Community

The findings from this study offer local communities and organizations useful information and insights for their programmatic, communication, and family advocacy efforts. Consider taking the following actions to utilize these findings in your own community:

- Share the findings with your local media, along with examples and stories of how your community and organization are already working to support parents and equip them as asset builders.
- Host a dialogue among parents, organizational staff, community leaders about the study's findings. How well do they match (or contrast with) the realities in your own community? How does your community or organization support families and build parents' strengths? What might be some implications of this study for your future work?
- Examine how you can affirm and support parents in your community and your organization so that they build a strong network of support and care for themselves and their children.

NOTE: Tools and resources for sharing the study findings are available at [www.abundantassets.org](http://www.abundantassets.org).



view. In particular, the growing body of research linking social networks to parenting demonstrates that the actions of communities, states, and society as a whole are a decisive factor in determining whether parents have the resources necessary for fulfilling our expectations of them” (p. 415).

In the process of talking with parents about their realities, their strengths, and their needs, communities can begin to rebuild the connections that families need. These connections can become the initial threads in the web of support and care that help families become and stay strong. In the end, parents and their children will become an important part of that web themselves—for themselves and for others in the community.

## **Ideas for Friends and Neighbors**

- Learn the names of parents and their children of the families who live in the homes and apartments in your neighborhood. Once you’ve established some trust with the parent, offer to spend time with the child in ways that are safe and comfortable for everyone.
- Create a neighborhood get-together (such as a potluck, cookout, or block party) with games so that neighbors can get to know each other.
- Reach out to parents with children. Find out about their family life and needs. For example, one neighbor learned that a parent worked a night shift and could never find evening child care. The neighbor volunteered to have the boy stay at the neighbor’s house in the evening and sleep there while the mother worked.
- With the permission of neighbors, develop a neighborhood directory that includes the names of family members (including the children), addresses, and phone numbers. This allows neighbors to reach out to each other more easily.
- Invite other neighbors (especially those with children and teenagers) to your home. Having a snack or meal together often helps build relationships.

## **Ideas for Schools**

- At open houses and other school functions, build in time for parents to meet each other. Work to build community among the parents of your students.
- Encourage couples with strong relationships to volunteer together to give kids role models of healthy marriages and partner relationships.
- Affirm parents’ efforts and encourage them to continue making a difference in the lives of their children.
- Create parent study groups and other small parent groups for parents to talk together and share ideas.
- Ask parents for feedback on what would support them as parents. Implement some of their suggestions.
- Include parents in conversations about schools and how they can support and engage parents.
- When you see evidence that parents are working hard with their children, find ways to affirm and encourage them.

## Questions for Community Reflection and Dialogue

The process of creating a community that puts families, parents, children, and teenagers at the top of the agenda entails closely examining your current, past, and future efforts. Consider these questions as you move forward:

- How can you mobilize individual parents and individual families? Instead of orchestrating formal structures and systems, focus on putting the power into the hands of the people.
  - How can you create a connected intergenerational community? Although you already have a community made up of diverse age ranges, most of these people probably are not connected with each other. How can you create ways for individuals to meet and build relationships with people of other age groups?
  - How can you reach parents and families throughout the year? It's easy to plan and create one-time family events and parent workshops, but having a commitment to parents and families involves reaching out and following up with them on multiple occasions.
  - How can you include parents and families in your planning efforts? What ideas do they have? How can you empower them to take leadership roles?
  - How can you be more inclusive at all levels? A family emphasis won't be as effective if it reaches only a segment of families. How can you include families across all racial, ethnic, religious, political, and economic lines?
  - How can you affirm the current efforts that strengthen families in your community? How can you recognize and publicize these efforts?
  - How can you deepen the exposure to the cultural strengths and traditions of diverse families in your community?
  - How can you create innovative ways to meet families' needs? Who are the forward and visionary thinkers in your community who can help you in developing these creative approaches?
  - How can you develop supports for parents and families that are meaningful and authentic?
  - How can you unite your community in putting families first?
- Develop easy, simple ways for parents to volunteer so that more parents can become involved in their child's school.
  - Find a variety of ways to engage parents in their child's learning that reflect their different strengths and life situations. Celebrate all types of involvement, from those who regularly volunteer in the school and those who are active in their child's education at home.
  - Send home tips for how parents can help their children develop solid homework habits and skills. Remind them of basic, asset-based parenting ideas, such as how to set boundaries with children at different ages, how to engage them in positive community activities, and similar issues. Help them see you as a resource.
  - Take seriously concerns that parents raise about overscheduling (particularly in relation to sports and other co-curricular activities). Work together to help them find balance in family life.
  - If parents don't attend open houses or parent-teacher conferences, reach out and



meet them on their turf. A one-time meeting can give you valuable information about how to best support the parents and the child.

- Annually get parents' feedback about your classroom and/or school. Sending a survey or forming a small focus group of parents can give you valuable information to improve your school or classroom even more.

## **Ideas for Family-Serving Organizations**

- Involve families in developing services and delivery plans, as well as being on committees or advisory groups. Empower them to make a difference in your organization or agency.
- Examine your existing family and parenting programs to determine whether they focus more on family deficits or family strengths. Also examine whether they are reaching all types of parents, both fathers and mothers, parents in different family structures, and parents from different cultural, ethnic, or language groups.
- Talk with parents in your community to learn how well the services you provide match their needs, interests, and priorities.
- Talk with families about the best ways to support, encourage, and equip them. Don't automatically assume that parents want workshops or other formal programs and activities.
- Do community-building activities in all your family programs and activities so that parents can get to know other parents. Be aware of parents who are struggling. Be proactive in offering support; don't wait for them to ask.
- Offer programs and services that strengthen the partner relationship, whether parents are married or divorced.
- Create family-friendly spaces within your facility (with refreshments, comfortable seating, and children's toys) where families and parents can relax, hang out, and talk with each other.
- Support and encourage family time. Avoid planning activities that disrupt or take away from family time.
- Develop advocacy skills in parents, children, and teenagers so they learn how to be their own best advocates.
- Affirm families in what they're already doing right. Help them see their strengths and show them how to build on their strengths.
- Provide parent education on how to parent effectively with the developmental assets framework. (One resource to consider is *Taking Asset Building Personally*, which is described in the resource list.)
- Offer opportunities and services that look at parents and families holistically and comprehensively ("wrap-around services") rather than focusing on just one part of life or one particular problem ("categorical services").
- Examine how your organization or agency can reinforce and strengthen the informal networks and sources of support that families value and need.
- Work with families to create family service-learning and other family leadership activities that help parents see themselves as leaders in the community.

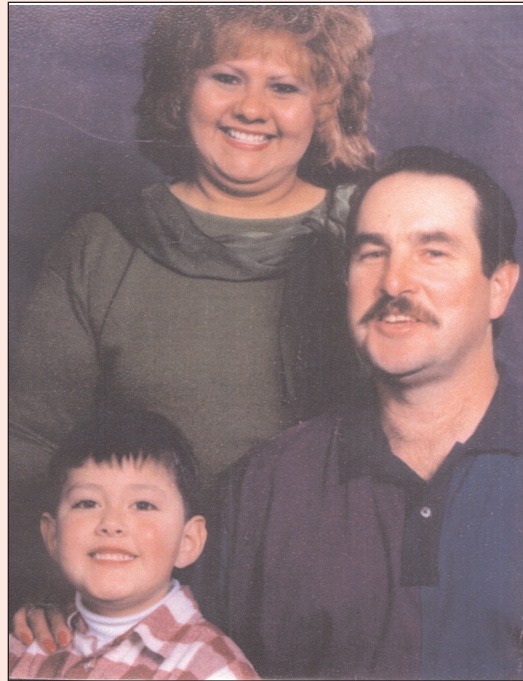
## The Balentine Family in California

### Parenting a Grandchild

When Vikki Balentine became a grandmother, she thought she was done with parenting. A single mother, she had raised two daughters on her own and provided for them by working as a hairdresser. "I thought if I work, dressed them nice, and made the home nice, then they would turn out well," she says. She married and decided to move on with her own life without kids.

Then Balentine's daughter went into drug rehabilitation. Her daughter's son, Carlos, was only 2 years old. "We had to step in or Child Protection Services would," Balentine says about that time. "My husband wanted to do this more than me. I was scared."

Balentine had been married only one year when she had to make a decision about whether or not to parent her grandson. Her husband, Steve, had never raised children before and was eager to become a parent. "I had raised two daughters, and I didn't do a very good job with them," Balentine says. Both daughters had become addicted to drugs, and both entered drug rehab. "I feared I was going to wreck my grandson's life like I did my daughter's."



In the end, Vikki and Steve Balentine decided to take custody of and parent Carlos. They also began looking for resources in the community to help them be effective parents. They discovered Parenting Partners in Fresno, California, a program of the Family Leadership Connection that develops parenting skills and empowers parents using developmental assets. "It helped me understand how to be with any kid, not just my grandchild," Balentine says. "Before that, I thought kids were trouble because my daughters created so much trouble."

Carlos lived with his grandparents for five years. "I had to deal with my grandson's emotions," Balentine says. "He was so sad. He would cry and say, 'I miss my mom.'" Balentine comforted her grandson and helped him articulate more of his feelings. That wasn't easy, as she was just learning how to identify and articulate feelings herself.

Balentine's husband got Carlos interested in baseball and books. "My husband read him books every night," she says. He also took a week off of work to care for Carlos when Balentine needed to fly to Pennsylvania to spend time with her other daughter. "He did everything: the diapering, the playing, the feeding, the reading," she says. "When I came back, they had really bonded. It was like Carlos was his own child."

Carlos now lives with his parents and younger brother in Arizona, but he comes to Fresno every summer to live with his grandparents. During the summer, Balentine's husband coaches Little League, and Carlos plays baseball with his grandfather. The three of them go to the movies, and they talk a lot. Balentine is proud of how her grandson, now 11, is doing. "He's getting A's and B's," Balentine says. "He's played drums for two years. He loves to sing. He's in a leadership program."

Balentine has been attending Al-Anon for a number of years. "I was addicted to people who were addicted to drugs," she says. "It made me understand a lot more about myself." Balentine says she is now closer to both her daughters, and they all talk about what has happened in their family. "We all understand how things got so screwed up," Balentine says. "We all understand each other more."

- Equip staff to work with families with children throughout the first two decades of life. Some research has shown that family support programs are most comfortable with younger children and, though interested, are not well equipped to address the issues of families with adolescents—a time period when these parents indicated the need for extra information and support. (See Scales, 1996.)
- Retain program staff who serve as positive role models and sources of support for children and teenagers.
- Design formal and informal mentoring programs that allow youth to spend positive time with other adults.

## **Ideas for Child-Care Providers**

- Explore the public perceptions of the importance of child care in your community. Be ready to advocate for families by highlighting the benefits of high-quality child care and addressing any stigma that may be associated with families using child care. (See Key Finding #5.)
- Learn the names of all the parents of the children you care for. Get to know them.
- As you learn new child-care techniques and ideas, share them with parents.
- Inform parents of the behavior expectations you have and encourage them to have these same expectations at home. When you have different expectations from parents, work together to find common ground.
- Periodically offer child care so that parents can enjoy an evening out.
- Provide verbal tips, occasional handouts, workshops, and other resources for parents to assist them with ongoing challenges.
- Support parents and treat them as partners and allies in their child's development.

## **The City of Longmont in Colorado**

### **Giving Parents a Break—and a Boost**

The City of Longmont, Colorado, nestled at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, believes that parents sometimes need a break in addition to resources. As part of the community's overall commitment to building developmental assets, the city has paid particular attention to providing support for parents in the community.

Susan Zimmerman, community programs coordinator, says that the city indoor pool (Centennial Pool) offers a parent night out event several nights a year. "Children can be dropped off at the pool for the evening so that they can have adult time in their lives while knowing their children are in a safe and supervised environment," she says. Parents can drop off their children ages 6 and older at the pool on a designated Saturday night from 6 to 10 p.m. Children not only can play with the one-meter diving board, the inflatable submarine, water toys in the shallow end, and two waterslides in the deep end, but they can also watch a movie and enjoy pizza and a fruit drink.

The city also offers free after-school programs for middle school youth, which helps working parents who want their children to be in a supervised setting. Parents also meet in parenting groups at the city's youth center. Different parenting groups support foster parents, stepparents, single parents, and two-parent families. "The city also offers free short-term counseling to families to help them get through the normal and not-so-normal crises that come with raising children," Zimmerman says.

Find specific examples of how parents are doing well and tell them.

- Meet with parents at least twice per year to share with each other information, expectations, and ideas about the child and her or his strengths and needs.
- Examine how well your child-care program is accessible to and meeting the needs of those families that most value and need the service, particularly those facing economic stresses.

### **Ideas for Congregations** (churches, mosques, synagogues, etc.)

- Talk with parents about how your congregation does—or doesn't—support and encourage them as parents. Examine whether your efforts to engage parents are designed primarily for parents to support your child and youth programs, or for the congregation to support and equip families.
- Form support groups made up of parents who have children around the same age.
- Be intentional in reaching out to and including families that may be struggling, including single-parent families and those facing economic stress. Be aware that, under stress, families are more likely to isolate themselves than to reach out for the support they need.
- Create meaningful ways for individual parents and family members to contribute to worship or prayer services, such as leading sacred readings, singing a solo, having a family provide the music, or other roles appropriate to your tradition.
- Take advantage of the intergenerational nature of your congregation by forming intentional mentoring relationships between older and younger parents.
- Encourage congregation members to spend time with children outside their family. (Parents indicated that this kind of engagement by people they trust would really help them as parents.)
- Provide occasional religious education experiences for the entire family rather than dividing family members by age groups.
- As part of their faith commitment, encourage members (both parents and nonparents) to provide encouragement and support to other parents they know who may be struggling.
- Develop short, one-time volunteer activities for parents to do since they're busy. Consider creating family service projects that family members can do together.
- Promote Marriage Encounter ([www.marriage-encounter.org](http://www.marriage-encounter.org)) or other marriage- and relationship-strengthening activities within your faith tradition.
- Survey parents in your congregation to identify their ongoing challenges and needs. Then engage them in working together to respond to their responses.

### **Ideas for Health-Care Providers**

- Provide stimulating, helpful materials for parents to read in your waiting room in addition to the age-appropriate materials and toys for children and teenagers. When appropriate, include take-home material that parents can review in private and when they specifically need it.
- Talk with parents about parenting issues and the places and people in the commu-

nity who offer them support. If they feel isolated, encourage them to connect with a network or organization that would fit their values, needs, and interests.

- Share positive, asset-building materials to parents, especially to new parents. New parents often are bombarded with scary messages about poisons and hazardous activities and household items from health-care providers.
- Build relationships with the parents of kids who are chronically ill or need care often. Find out more about their needs, fears, and hopes.
- Encourage parents to join your health-care advisory group or board, if you have one. If you don't (or parents aren't allowed), figure out ways to get parents' input for your practice.
- Host a family community event or classes for parents. Some health-care providers have an annual "teddy bear band" concert (where the children can bring their teddy bears). Others offer classes on pertinent issues for parents.

## **Ideas for Employers**

- Ask parents for ideas on how your company could support them more. Include them in creating new or changing existing company policies.
- Offer family-friendly policies, such as tax-deferred child-care payment options, time off to attend school conferences and activities, flexible scheduling, and other family-friendly benefits.
- Ask employees who are parents for ideas for improving the balance between work and family. Researchers have found that parents who feel they are succeeding at home are more likely to succeed at work (Galinsky, 1999).
- Ask parents if they would value formal or informal learning opportunities around parenting issues during lunch breaks or other times. Provide space, and encourage interested parents to participate. If parents are interested, identify a resource person in the community who can facilitate training for parents during this time.
- As an incentive, periodically give parents movie, sports, or theater tickets and encourage them to enjoy a night out with adults.
- Focus corporate giving in ways that promote family strengths and asset building in your community.
- Ensure that support for parents and families is part of employee assistance programs for times of particular stress or crisis.
- Explore job sharing, job splitting, part-time leave without pay, part-time work, part-year employment, working from home, and flexible-leave provisions to assist employees who are parents.

## **Ideas for Communities**

- Ensure that parents are part of the conversation and planning when you're developing initiatives designed to support, equip, and encourage families.
- Sponsor and support community-wide events for parents and families. Consider beginning with dialogues about the themes that surfaced in this study.
- Explore community-wide approaches for examining and, if needed, addressing



## The Visalia YMCA in California

### Easing the Stress of Custodial Exchanges

Some parents with joint custody have poor or contentious relationships with their ex. When it's time to bring their child to their former partner, emotions can run high.

To provide a neutral, safe, nurturing environment for these exchanges, the Visalia YMCA in Visalia, California, provides the Safe Exchange Program for court-ordered exchanges between custodial parents. "This is a place where kids can be kids and not worry about what's going on at home," says Safe Exchange Coordinator Kris McClure. Children may stay at the center for up to an hour. While one staff person talks to the parent, another staff person plays with the child until the other parent arrives. Thirty children and their parents use the service on a regular basis.

McClure sees how the program helps children and parents change. Over time, children play less aggressively as they adjust to the positive environment. Stress levels for parents and their children also drop. One young couple created a written agreement establishing goals so that the parents could eventually do exchanges at home. "We help parents put their children first," McClure says. "I would like to see every child who has a custody exchange to be in a program like this. This type of program helps everyone—the parents and the kids."

the issue of overscheduling for children and teenagers. This exploration may include developing shared commitments across the community (including schools, religious institutions, civic organizations, etc.) not to schedule activities on a certain evening of the week (or once a month). This way, families can spend time together. For more ideas, visit [puttingfamilyfirst.info/index.html](http://puttingfamilyfirst.info/index.html).

- Link families with similar backgrounds (blended families together, single-parent families together, etc.) to discuss issues and provide support.
- Create an annual parent recognition program, event, or award that highlights parents who are model parents and who are succeeding as parents despite the odds.
- Learn more about the families in your community. Which cultures, languages, family types, and family issues are part of life for families in your community? Then be strategic about addressing the needs of these families.
- Create a family directory of your community that includes parks, services, child-care providers, individual music teachers, clubs for kids, dentists, physicians, family events, parenting classes, and other resources your community offers. Distribute the directory to all families in your community and/or make it available through a Web site that can be updated regularly.
- Provide information and support to parents of newborns and newly adoptive parents. Create a packet of information for realtors to give to families who move into your community. Also encourage informal community leaders and mentors to form a personal relationships with parents during these transition times.
- Create parenting study groups where parents come together regularly to discuss parenting issues. Focus on how parents can build strengths, rather than emphasizing the problems that families and children face. Working on building community in these parenting groups so those parents develop a supportive network.

## **Ideas for Policy Makers and Funders**

- Engage parents as active partners in shaping policy initiatives.
- Recognize the power in creating policies and initiatives that strengthen families rather than deal only with their problems.
- Explore how to create a continuum of parent and family supports that address a wide range of families and that span the first two decades of life, recognizing particularly the critical parenting issues that emerge in early adolescence.
- Use policies and funding to reinforce the natural and existing resources for parents, such as neighbors, extended family, schools, and communities.
- Examine your current policies to see whether they're enriching or undermining parental strengths and capacities.
- Invest in research that examines effective strategies for building strong marriages. While some promising insights are emerging from existing research, much more needs to be known. (See Moore et al., 2002).
- Expand benchmarks and measures of parenting issues beyond demographics and deficits to address family strengths.



## Ideas for Action

# Building Strengths in and around Your Own Family

Parents and other family members do not have to wait for others in the community to take action to strengthen family life and family supports. Here are some ideas for action for parents, children, teenagers, and extended family members.

**B***uilding Strong Families* begins to explore how parents contribute to their child's healthy development through the framework of developmental assets. It highlights parents' own sense of their success, the challenges they face, and the kinds of support and resources they value. Based on the themes in the study as well as other research on child and adolescent development, here are a few ideas for how parents can enrich their own asset-building efforts.

### Ideas for Parents of Children of All Ages

- Take time to reflect on the strengths you see in your own family and your own strengths as a parent—perhaps against the odds or in the face of major challenges. Celebrate and affirm these strengths together in your family.
- Review the framework of developmental assets that is appropriate for the age of your child or children. (Five age-specific asset frameworks are available at [www.search-institute.org/assets](http://www.search-institute.org/assets).) Post it on your refrigerator door or in another visible place as a reminder of “the good stuff” you do and can do as a parent.
- Find other parents to connect with and learn from.
- Take time to focus on strengthening your relationship with your spouse or partner. If you don't have a partner, find friends and relatives who can be strong supports for you and your children.
- Ask other parents if they're experiencing some of the ongoing challenges you have as a parent. If they don't, find out if they know other parents who are. Then connect with those parents.
- Make your needs known. If it would be helpful for your neighbor to get to know your kids, say so. Then invite your neighbor to your home.
- Stay connected and involved in supportive places and networks (such as a faith community, service organization, or neighborhood association) during times of stress or transition. While it may seem easier to pull away, remember that those

networks can be important sources of strength for you as a parent and for your whole family.

- If you have concerns about your own (or your partner's) parenting, anger, or violence within your family, seek counsel from a trusted professional, such as a counselor, religious leader, or doctor.

### **Ideas for Parents of Infants** (Birth to 12 Months)

- Take advantage of the available opportunities in your community for connecting with other parents and learning about child development. Check with your community's school district, community education office, or a family-serving organization such as the YMCA to learn about available opportunities.
- Get to know the unique personality of your baby. Is he or she active? gentle? quiet? noisy? Find ways to work with your baby's temperament instead of against it.
- Pace yourself. Caring for infants is very demanding, especially when they haven't begun sleeping through the night and when they become mobile, such as crawling or scooting.
- Make it a priority to maintain or find friends and mentors for yourself as a par-

## **Ohio County Together We Care in Kentucky**

### **Developing Opportunities for Parents through School**

Ohio County is the fifth-largest geographic county in Kentucky, yet only 23,000 people live in the county. "Because families are spread out, the schools have become the central location for community and parenting activities," says James Robinson, director of the county initiative, Ohio County Together We Care.

At Western Elementary in Centertown, Kentucky, Principal Lonnie McKinney and members of the Family Resource and Youth Service Center visit all the parents of the 313 students during the summer in their homes. The school also offers four parent trainings each year on how to build the 40 developmental assets to help their kids succeed.

In the same county, Fordsville Elementary School offers many activities for parents to get involved with the school and in their children's lives. The school has a Parent Involvement Day where parents spend an entire school day with their child, attending classes, completing assignments, playing at recess, and participating in after-school activities. The school also offers a:

- *Drama/Storytelling Night*, where parents and their children learn about theater, the stage, and theater scripts so that they can perform skits together.
- *Portfolio Sharing/Math-Science Night*, where parents and young people learn together how to write a portfolio and work with math and science problems. This helps parents become more involved with their children's homework.
- *Santa Shop in December*, so that parents and children can go shopping together at one of the rooms in the school that is filled with small gifts to purchase.
- *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Support Group*, for practical ideas on how to become more involved with the children and receive the support they need.
- *Scrapbooking Class*, for parents and kids to make scrapbooks together, which also fosters communication between them.

ent. As Ellen Galinsky (1987) writes, “In the first years of parenthood, friendships can be like lifelines out into the world” (p. 109).

- To the extent that you are comfortable, welcome the offers from extended family, trusted friends, and responsible teenagers to care for your child for short periods of time. Give yourself a break.
- Work hard to maintain a strong relationship with your spouse or partner. Recognize that a new child in the family changes family dynamics and affects your partner relationship.
- Create a home environment and consistent routine that brings out the best in your infant.
- Connect with a pediatrician, other parents, extended family members, neighbors, and/or friends when you have questions.
- Put your baby first when attending events, gatherings, and activities away from home. You may need to step out to feed, change a diaper, play, or comfort your baby.

### Questions for Reflection and Dialogue within Families

- What are the things you like most about your family? What do you see as its strengths?
- Who are people you see as offering your family a lot of encouragement and support? If you can't think of many, who would be some people or places where you would like to build a relationship that could become a real support for your family?
- Do all members of the family feel appreciated for their contribution to family life? If not, what would help each person feel appreciated?
- What are ways that your family makes building a strong relationship between parents a high priority?
- What would be one thing that would most help the parents in your family be more successful in parenting? How can you work together to make it possible?

### Ideas for Parents of Toddlers (13 to 35 Months)

- Reflect on how being a parent is changing you and changing your relationships with those around you. If you find that the relationships you relied on before becoming a parent no longer seem as strong or supportive, explore whether to rekindle them or to seek out new relationships for your new life stage.
- As your toddler becomes more independent and moves into a bigger world, balance your expressions of love and care with setting and enforcing fair, consistent, and appropriate boundaries. But also try to say yes more than you say no.
- Take your toddler to places that expand her or his imagination. Visit parks, playgrounds, zoos, puddles, ant hills, and piles of leaves.
- Give your toddler extra time to do all the things he or she wants to do, such as putting on socks, combing hair, or pouring juice. Expect many messes while your toddler learns new skills.
- Find someone who really enjoys your toddler and can give you some respite once in a while. Toddlers need other caring adults, and you will also benefit from a much-needed break.
- You may be more comfortable now leaving your child with a grandparent or trusted friend. Plan getaway days or weekends with your spouse or partner.

## **Ideas for Parents of Preschoolers** (Ages 3 to 5 Years)

- Give your preschooler puzzles, clay, and building block sets that help him or her practice eye-hand coordination and thinking skills.
- Meet with other parents, neighbors, caregivers, friends, and/or extended family members to talk about how to support each other.
- Encourage preschoolers to play with others, but closely monitor their interactions. Preschoolers can easily become upset and not know how to resolve conflicts peacefully.
- If your child is in preschool or child care, work to build a sense of partnership with the child-care providers. Take time to get to know them, listen to their ideas, and share your own ideas, questions, and suggestions. Thank them for their investment in your child's development.
- Name the emotions your preschooler is acting out. Teach your preschooler how to use words instead of actions to express emotions.

## **Ideas for Parents of Elementary-Age Children** (Ages 6 to 11 Years)

- Become an active partner in your child's education. Assist with homework. Attend parent-teacher conferences and open houses. If you are able, consider taking more of a leadership role in the school.
- Identify activities, clubs, and/or sports that your child enjoys. Get to know the adults who lead these activities as well as other parents of participating children. Cheer on the other kids who are involved.
- Encourage your child to have friends over to play. Spend some time getting to know your child's friends and their parents.
- Share family responsibilities with your child. Not only will it begin to teach responsibility, but it can also help your workload and be fun to do together.

### **YMCA Hiawatha Branch in Minneapolis**

#### **Helping Families with Multiracial Children Become More Successful**

When the primary caregiver belongs to the majority race, how does he or she parent a multiracial child? That question prompted Barbara Jones to focus on this issue as she facilitated support groups and family programs at the YMCA Hiawatha Branch in Minneapolis in the mid-1980s.

Families learned about how important it was to have role models and friends who represented the cultures and races of these kids. Through these YMCA programs and support groups, they talked about the food they ate, the books they read—even the way they decorated their homes. “They needed the language to talk about these issues at home and in a safe environment,” Jones says. “For a multiracial child, there is another layer about figuring out the child's identity and peer group.”

Today as branch manager, Jones has seen the importance of bringing in adults from the other cultures and races as role models and friends for multiracial kids. “These kids . . . need to see themselves reflected in the world around them.”

- Read aloud to your child and regularly listen to your child practice reading aloud. Visit the library often.
- Learn more about the parenting issues that may puzzle you, such as bullying, developing homework skills, or getting picky eaters to try more foods. Read parenting magazines and books.
- Talk to other parents. Attend parenting workshops and classes on topics that interest you.
- Begin talking with others and learning about the transition into adolescence so that you are more prepared.

## **Ideas for Parents of Teenagers** (Ages 12 to 18 Years)

- Work hard to avoid being swept away by the stereotypes about the horrors of adolescence. Remember that, while some young people do face serious problems during these years, many young people thrive, and many parents greatly enjoy building a new kind of relationship with their emerging adult child.
- Try to view this time of change and growth in the same way you viewed and took pride in your baby's amazing changes during the first years of life.
- Make it a priority to build mutually supportive relationships with other parents of teenagers. Share experiences, brainstorm solutions, and be there for each other.
- Know the names of all of your teenager's friends. Periodically ask them about themselves to get to know them more.
- Get to know your teen's teachers, and find ways to stay connected to them.
- Stay actively involved in your child's schooling and other programs and activities (such as religious youth groups, sports, or music). If he or she is uncomfortable with you being a visible leader or volunteer in her or his activities, find less visible, behind-the-scenes ways to stay involved and connected.
- Monitor how your teen spends his or her time. Is there a balance of school, homework, activities, friends, work, and family time?
- Continue to teach essential skills, such as how to do laundry, cook, use money well, treat others, and follow through with assignments and responsibilities.
- Stay involved and informed about the

### **ROPE in Connecticut**

#### **Initiating Teens (with Their Parents) into Adulthood**

Instead of leaving young people and their parents to fend for themselves during the teenage years, the Center for the Advancement of Youth, Family and Community Service in Glastonbury, Connecticut, has developed a six-year process called the Rite of Passage Experience (ROPE). It is an initiative in youth and community development that links teenagers and their parents with community resources. The initiative also has concrete programmatic elements that help to build strong kids, strong families, and strong communities. Young people participate in a series of trust-, team-, and confidence-building exercises that lead to completing a challenge course (which is somewhat similar to a ropes course) at a local park.

Although youth development is a key aspect of this initiative, parent involvement is key. Parents and teenagers build skills together to communicate and problem solve more effectively. As one parent said, "ROPE provides a common language for us to talk to our children during the turbulent times of adolescence."

music, movies, video or computer games, and other media your teenager enjoys.

- Take advantage of your child's new levels of independence and responsibility to focus new attention on strengthening your relationship with your partner or spouse. Maybe you can go out on a date, too!
- Don't hesitate to seek professional help if problems arise that you feel unprepared to address (such as substance abuse, eating disorders, or premature sexual activity). It's a sign of health to ask for support and help.

## **Ideas for Children**

- Thank your parents when they do nice or special things for you.
- Tell your parents when they're doing things right. Your parents support you. How can you support or encourage them?
- Learn which rules are most important to your parents and why. Find out what will happen if you break a rule.
- Think about ways you can help reduce the bickering with your siblings. If you are an only child, talk with your parents about issues that raise tension in your family.
- How can you support your parents? What one thing could you do that could help out your parents?
- If your parent(s) often get really angry at you or hurt you, talk about it with someone you trust, such as a teacher, grandparent, or other caring adult.

## **Ideas for Teenagers**

- Ask your parents more about themselves. Ask them about their most embarrassing moments or their role models when they were growing up. Find out about their work, their accomplishments, their passions. Think about what kind of relationship you want with them as you mature and become more independent.
- Think about and tell your parents what you need to take good care of yourself (eating more fruits and vegetables for snacks, having good running shoes for exercise, getting more rest, spending time learning about things that interest you).
- If your parents are married, find out what your parents like about each other and how that has changed or stayed the same over the years. If you live with a single parent, ask her or him about which adult friends he or she enjoys most, and why.
- Hang out with people, both younger and older, who help you feel good about yourself.
- Take responsibility for helping out at home, particularly if a parent is feeling a lot of stress or is struggling with work-related issues.
- Talk about things that are important to you (such as music, school, news, friendships, faith, social issues). Tell others what you think—and why.
- Find adults to talk to whom both you and your parent trust. Spend time doing things you both enjoy—volunteering, making things, hiking, playing sports, or going to concerts or movies with groups of friends.
- Seek their support and encouragement when you need it.



## **Ideas for Extended Family Members**

- Ask parents how you can be most supportive of them in their parenting role.
- Send notes affirming parents and celebrating milestones in a child's life.
- Take advantage of opportunities to spend time with children while also giving the parent(s) a respite or opportunity to spend time together.
- If needed, negotiate reasonable limits on how much responsibility you can (or should) take for child care, babysitting, or other responsibilities. Keep an open, mutually respectful dialogue about what works best for everyone.
- Listen more than you talk.
- Support parents in their efforts to set boundaries and enforce discipline.
- Pay attention to how much you are affirming and supporting the parents for the positive choices they're making instead of always criticizing (overtly or subtly) the choices they have made as parents. Your suggestions will be more welcomed when the parents know that, in general, you admire the great job they are doing

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## Postscript

# Creating a Vision for Strong Parents and Strong Families

*Building Strong Families* begins to frame key elements of a vision for asset-based parenting and community supports for parents. It leaves many unanswered questions that suggest directions for future research.

For several decades, many other researchers have been examining and documenting the strengths of families and parents (see, for example, Curran, 1983; Olson, 1989; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985; Walsh, 1998). *Building Strong Families* seeks to build on this tradition of research and practice by beginning to tie it to the framework of developmental assets.

This poll and report are clearly exploratory and preliminary. Numerous questions remain unanswered, including the following:

- Why are parents not building formal and informal networks of support in their communities? How could such networks become more common for parents?
- How are public attitudes toward parents in this society affecting parents and parenting? How accurate or inaccurate are those perceptions?
- What different patterns or shifts would emerge in a truly nationally representative poll of parents that included an adequate sample size to allow for comparisons across cultures, family structures, and other differences?
- What additional strengths and dynamics for asset building are present in families in communities of color, in single-parent families, and other diverse families?
- What are qualities of asset-rich families and parents? How can communities and organizations support and strengthen parents as asset builders?
- How do parents' asset-building efforts, sources of support, and interests change and evolve as their children grow?
- Given where parents seek information and support and the kinds of help they value, what strategies will be most effective in building family strengths?

Both YMCA of the USA and Search Institute are committed to moving forward, together with allies and colleagues, to examine these kinds of questions and to develop strategies to support parents and strengthen communities. As we examine these kinds of questions together, we will learn new approaches for mobilizing individuals, organizations, and communities to become more intentional and proactive in supporting and equipping parents as asset builders.

# Selected Resources

The following resources give additional information from the *Building Strong Families* study and provide insights and ideas for supporting parents and helping parents in their role as asset builders.

## **Additional Information on *Building Strong Families* available at [www.abundantassets.org](http://www.abundantassets.org)**

**Building Strong Families: Highlights from a Preliminary Survey**—This 16-page report introduces the five key findings of the *Building Strong Families* poll conducted by the YMCA of the USA and Search Institute. The summary may be downloaded at no cost from [www.abundantassets.org](http://www.abundantassets.org). Bulk copies may be purchased from Search Institute.

**Building Strong Families: Power Point® Presentation**—Download this ready-to-use Power Point® presentation that highlights the five key findings of the *Building Strong Families* poll.

**Building Strong Families: Insights from Research**—Get regular updates on the study and related research by signing up for the project's free electronic newsletter. To subscribe, go to [www.abundantassets.org](http://www.abundantassets.org) or [www.search-institute.org/families](http://www.search-institute.org/families).

## **Resources from YMCA of the USA**

### **Resources for Families and Other Community Members**

*To locate a YMCA near you, check your local Yellow Pages or go to [www.ymca.net](http://www.ymca.net).*

**Family Programming**—Many YMCAs have programs for families, such as Prime Time Family Time, family fitness, parent-child programs, family camps, family resource centers, and family volunteer programs.

**Child Care**—Many YMCAs provide child-care centers that are family-centered, values-based programs to nurture children's healthy development. Many have begun using developmental assets as a foundation. Collectively, YMCAs are the largest provider of child care in the United States. Eighty-four percent of YMCA school-age programs are located in schools. Many YMCAs receive support from local schools and school boards.

**YMCA Strong Families Zone**—Log onto [www.ymca.net](http://www.ymca.net) to access the YMCA Strong Families Zone. Family members and family advocates will find tips and resources on topics that matter most to families today: Child care, exercise, nutrition, youth development, and more. Check back regularly for new information that will help keep families strong. The YMCA Strong Families Zone is sponsored by the Kimberly-Clark Corporation, a national sponsor of the YMCA commitment to supporting and strengthening today's families.

## Family Programming Resources for Local YMCAs

YMCA staff and volunteers have available to them a wealth of family programming resources. The YMCA Program Store (800-747-0089) carries several resources including *Prime Time Family Time*, *Principles of YMCA Family Programs*, *YMCA Family Resource and Support Programs*, *YMCA Parent-Child Programs*, and more. The Program Development Division of the YMCA of the USA (800-872-9622) is available for consultation and will mail you numerous free resources such as *Critical Issues: Strengthening and Supporting Families Today* and *Suggested Practices for Family Friendly YMCAs*. Finally, staff members and volunteers will find a virtual storehouse of knowledge and links to high-quality resources on the family page of the YMCA Extranet, [www.ymcausa.org](http://www.ymcausa.org).

## Resources from Search Institute

*The following resources are available at [www.search-institute.org/catalog](http://www.search-institute.org/catalog) or by calling, toll free, 877-240-7251.*

### For Parents

**Parenting with a Purpose**—This colorful booklet presents how asset building can enrich family life and parenting. It includes practical ideas for how parents can build assets and find support in community.

**Raising Healthy Children Day by Day**—This collection of 366 daily inspirational readings includes quotations, brief essays, and action ideas to encourage and motivate parents and others who care for children to build assets in children from birth to age 5.

**Tag, You're It!**—This easy-to-read book offers 50 commonsense ways to connect and build assets with young people. Companion posters are also available.

**Taking Asset Building Personally: Personal Action Workbook**—This reflection guide allows parents and other adults to reflect on their own asset-building experiences, roles, and opportunities. A facilitator's guide is available for leading study/discussion groups of parents.

**What Kids Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Raise Good Kids**—This best-selling book includes hundreds of practical ideas for asset building, including many specifically for parents. Focuses primarily on parents of teenagers. Available in English and Spanish.

**What Young Children Need to Succeed**—This book compiles hundreds of asset-building ideas and stories for children between birth and age 10. It includes numerous age-appropriate ideas for parents, child care workers, educators, and others.

### For People and Organizations That Support Parents

**40 Ways Anyone Can Build Assets**—This inexpensive handout offers simple suggestions for how anyone, including parents, can build each of the eight categories of developmental assets. Sold in packets.

**150 Ways to Show Kids You Care**—This unusual poster/flyer gives easy, practical, and creative ideas that parents and other adults can use to build assets. Available in English and Spanish. Sold in packets.

**The Asset Approach: 40 Elements of Healthy Development**—This eight-page booklet introduces the 40 developmental assets and discusses how everyone can be an asset builder. Useful in introducing the assets to parents and staff. Available in English and Spanish. Sold in packets.

**Grading Grown-Ups 2002**—This summary of a major Search Institute study of American adults and teenagers focuses on building relationships between children and nonparent adults. It highlights the importance of parents inviting other adults to build relationship with their children. Sold in packets.

**Ideas for Parents Newsletter Master Set**—This collection of 50 reproducible newsletter masters provides schools and other organizations with an easy-to-use resource to offer parents asset-building ideas. It includes two introductory newsletters, a newsletter on each category of assets, and one newsletter for each of the 40 assets.

**Martin's Good Things**—This children's storybook introduces the message behind the 40 assets. Designed for parents and children to read together. Sold in packets.

**Pass It On! Ready-to-Use Handouts for Asset Builders**—This book contains almost 100 reproducible handouts with tips for asset building, including many for parents and extended family.

**The Possible Dream: What Families in Distressed Communities Need to Help Youth Thrive**—This study of families in two economically distressed communities examines the opportunities for and challenges of asset building by Families. It emphasizes the importance of both informal and formal supports for families.

**The Power of Parents: Parent Engagement in Schools and the Developmental Assets**—This resource describes how the developmental asset framework offers school communities a powerful resource for strengthening relationships between parents, school staff, and students, based on experiences in schools in Colorado.

**What Young Children Need to Succeed Leader's Guide**—This guide includes workshop outlines for parent education and reproducible handouts on asset building with children from birth to age 10.

**You Can Make a Difference for Kids**—This interactive booklet introduces people to the assets in nontechnical language. Includes the framework of assets for each age group of children. Sold in packets.



## Appendix A

# Developmental Assets and Parenting: The Context and Rationale for *Building Strong Families*

**V**irtually all parents want their children to grow up caring, responsible, and productive. Beyond basic needs, what do children and teenagers need from parents, extended family, other adults, organizations, and communities to help them thrive?

Since the late 1980s, Search Institute has been studying the positive experiences, opportunities, and personal qualities that young people need to thrive. We call them “developmental assets,” or building blocks for healthy development. Shown in the chart on page 70, this research-based framework identifies 40 assets that, when present in kids’ lives, help them make positive choices and avoid negative choices (Benson, 1997; Benson & Leffert, 2001; Benson et al., 1999; Benson et al., 2002; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Search Institute, 2002). For example, young people with more assets are less likely to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors, such as premature sexual activity, alcohol and other drug use, violence, and attempted suicide (see Leffert et al., 1998). In addition, they are more likely to exhibit thriving behaviors, such as succeeding in school, valuing diversity, and maintaining good health (see Scales et al., 2000).

Each year, about 200,000 6th- to 12th-grade students in communities across North America are surveyed using this framework. Consistently, young people experience, on average, only about half of these 40 developmental assets. (For more information on the developmental assets, including adaptations of the asset framework for children from birth through 5th grade, visit [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org).)

The presentation of the developmental assets framework on page 70 includes the percentages of young people who experience each asset, based on surveys from more than 217,000 6th to 12th graders in the United States who were surveyed during the 1999-2000 school year. Assets that are measured using items that explicitly reference parents are shaded. Several patterns are noteworthy:

- Seventy percent of young people experience the family support asset (asset #1), making it one of the most widely reported of the assets.
- Fewer young people (30%) experience the positive family communication asset (asset #2), and only 34% have parents who are active in their schooling (asset #6). About half of the young people surveyed experience the family boundaries asset (asset #11).

# Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets

External Assets		Internal Assets	
<b>Support</b>		<b>Commitment to Learning</b>	
1. <i>Family support—Family life provides high levels of love and support.</i>	70%	21. <b>Achievement motivation</b> —Young person is motivated to do well in school.	67%
2. <i>Positive family communication—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.</i>	30%	22. <b>School engagement</b> —Young person is actively engaged in learning.	61%
3. <b>Other adult relationships</b> —Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.	45%	23. <b>Homework</b> —Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.	53%
4. <b>Caring neighborhood</b> —Young person experiences caring neighbors.	40%	24. <b>Bonding to school</b> —Young person cares about her or his school.	54%
5. <b>Caring school climate</b> —School provides a caring, encouraging environment.	29%	25. <b>Reading for pleasure</b> —Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.	23%
6. <i>Parent involvement in schooling—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.</i>	34%	<b>Positive Values</b>	
<b>Empowerment</b>		26. <b>Caring</b> —Young person places high value on helping other people.	50%
7. <b>Community values youth</b> —Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.	25%	27. <b>Equality and social justice</b> —Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.	52%
8. <i>Youth as resources—Young people are given useful roles in the community.</i>	28%	28. <b>Integrity</b> —Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.	68%
9. <b>Service to others</b> —Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.	51%	29. <b>Honesty</b> —Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”	67%
10. <i>Safety—Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.</i>	51%	30. <b>Responsibility</b> —Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.	63%
<b>Boundaries and Expectations</b>		31. <b>Restraint</b> —Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.	47%
11. <i>Family boundaries—Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.</i>	48%	<b>Social Competencies</b>	
12. <b>School boundaries</b> —School provides clear rules and consequences.	53%	32. <b>Planning and decision making</b> —Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.	30%
13. <b>Neighborhood boundaries</b> —Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.	49%	33. <b>Interpersonal competence</b> —Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.	47%
14. <i>Adult role models—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.</i>	30%	34. <b>Cultural competence</b> —Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.	42%
15. <b>Positive peer influence</b> —Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.	65%	35. <b>Resistance skills</b> —Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.	42%
16. <i>High expectations—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.</i>	49%	36. <b>Peaceful conflict resolution</b> —Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.	45%
<b>Constructive Use of Time</b>		<b>Positive Identity</b>	
17. <b>Creative activities</b> —Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.	20%	37. <b>Personal power</b> —Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”	44%
18. <b>Youth programs</b> —Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.	58%	38. <b>Self-esteem</b> —Young person reports having a high self-esteem.	52%
19. <b>Religious community</b> —Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.	63%	39. <b>Sense of purpose</b> —Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”	59%
20. <b>Time at home</b> —Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.	52%	40. <b>Positive view of personal future</b> —Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.	74%

Asset framework. Copyright © 1997 by Search Institute. This framework was created for adolescents. For adaptations of the framework for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and elementary-age children, visit [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org).

Note: The eight assets shown in blue italics (assets #1, 2, 6, 8, 10, 11, 14, and 16) are measured using items that specifically mention family or parents. Additional assets (such as #20) specifically address family life, though they do not mention parents or families in the measurement. And, of course, parents and families are integral to building all 40 assets.

The percentage next to each asset is based on surveys of 217,000 6th- to 12th-grade youth surveyed in the United States during the 1999-2000 school year.

- Several of the assets that explicitly mention parents also include other adults. These include youth as resources (asset #8), safety (asset #10), adult role models (asset #14), and high expectations (asset #16). In each of these cases, young people are more likely to report that parents are providing these assets than the other adults. For example (asset #16), 85% of youth agree or strongly agree that their parents have high expectations for them in school; in comparison, 53% of youth say their teachers have high expectations.
- It is important to note that parents play a particularly vital role in instilling all the internal assets. Indeed, extensions of the asset framework into early childhood articulate many of the internal assets as family qualities.

These findings illustrate that, from young people's perspectives, most parents are doing some of the important things that kids need to thrive. While there are clearly some areas for improvement, the great majority of young people give parents good reports on most of the dimensions related specifically to parent behavior. This research is consistent with numerous other studies where the vast majority of children and youth have given their parents high marks.

This study grows out of recognition of the vital role that parents play in building these 40 developmental assets. Exploring parenting from a strength-based perspective, we propose, has the same powerful potential for enriching family life and supports for parents as the framework of assets has had in mobilizing individuals, families, communities, and organizations to build a positive future for young people.

## Appendix B

# Technical Information on the Study

**B**uilding Strong Families is a study of the YMCA of the USA and Search Institute. It was made possible, in part, through a generous grant from the Kimberly-Clark Corporation, Dallas, Texas. It was conducted as part of the Abundant Assets Alliance, which combines the resources of the YMCA of the USA, YMCA Canada, and Search Institute to strengthen the capacity of YMCAs and the communities they serve to provide young people with the support and experiences they need to become healthy, caring, and competent adults. (This study did not include Canada.)

The study builds on Search Institute's framework of 40 "developmental assets," which are positive factors that have been found through research to be critical for young people to grow up healthy, responsible, and caring. It was conducted as an initial step in contributing to a positive, community-based vision of parents and families. Elements of that vision include:

- Recognizing strengths of parents, regardless of their family composition, cultural backgrounds, or other individual differences;
- Helping families and those who support them focus on building strengths in children and teenagers;
- Recognizing that parenting is an ongoing task throughout childhood and adolescence that requires ongoing growth, learning, and support; and
- Recognizing that parenting is best done in the context of a supportive, engaged community.

The first steps we took in shaping this positive vision of asset-building parents and engaging with allies who share this vision were:

- Engaging parents and youth (through several

focus groups near Minneapolis, Minnesota, and through e-mail contact with selected parents and youth in the YMCA and Search Institute networks) and experts in family life and parenting (through an advisory committee, as listed on page 4) in dialogue about qualities of asset-building parents and the design of an exploratory poll of parents (March–April 2002);

- Designing a 15-minute telephone survey, as shown in Appendix C.
- Conducting a national poll of parents (May 2002), which was designed to gain parents' perspectives on their strengths, challenges, sources of supports, and needs;
- Conducting in-depth journalistic interviews with parents and community leaders who provide supports and programs for parents (summer 2002);
- Analyzing and interpreting findings from the poll, including analysis of responses of different subsets of parents within the larger sample (summer 2002);
- Sharing the findings nationally, in communities, through YMCAs, and in other networks to begin dialogue and positive action; and
- Identifying and preparing for next steps to build on this initial exploration.

## Data Collection Methodology and Description of the Sample

The polling firm Global Strategy Group (GSG), located in New York City and Washington, D.C., was contracted to identify and interview a sample of U.S. parents. The respondents were identified in a several-step process. First, GSG purchased a list of parents of children that had participated in a previous panel study. The universe of eligibility for that panel study was all telephone-owning house-

holds in the 50 states plus the District of Columbia. Second, GSG then randomly selected parents, guided by quotas for age, marital status, etc., based on both national Census data and existing studies with comparable (though not identical) target groups.

Between May 5 and 15, 2002, those randomly selected households were called up to three times before being counted as not reachable. Thirty-seven percent of all phone numbers called three times resulted in contact with an eligible parent. Of that group, 7.4% agreed to participate in the poll and interviews were completed. The interviews averaged about 13 minutes in length. No data were collected that enabled us to compare respondents with refusals, but telephone polls typically underrepresent people of color and those in lower-income brackets. Margins of error for the entire sample were +/- 3 percentage points, with higher margins of error when comparing subgroups (e.g., by gender, race/ethnicity, etc.).

Three screening filters were used to select the sample. Respondents had to self-identify as parents, be 18 years of age or older, and if they had only one child, that child had to be older than 5 years of age. (The latter screen was employed because several items were most relevant to parents of school-age children.) Parents were included whose youngest child was under 5 (4% of the sample), as long as they had another child who was age 5 or older. Parents were included whether or not they had a child under 18 living at home, but only 10% of the sample did not have a child at home. The screening filters had the effect of producing a sample in which noncustodial parents, teenage parents, and younger parents were under-represented.

Interviewers identified GSG as a national opinion research firm, and said that “we’re talking with parents all over the country today about some important issues in your community, and would like to ask you a few questions on a confidential basis.” They indicated this was not a sales call, and that “we simply want to know your opinion on some issues of interest.” (See Appendix C for the actual survey instrument.)

In order to obtain parent perspectives about a broad age range of children, respondents with more than one child were asked to use their youngest or oldest child as the focus child when considering the survey questions. The direction to use the youngest or oldest child was alternated for each successive parent respondent in the poll. Thus, even though a given parent’s youngest child might have been 15 and another parent’s oldest child 7, the instructions yielded a parent perspectives that collectively reflected concerns of raising both younger and older children.

Figure 19 compares the distribution of the sample across a variety of demographic indicators to national benchmarks. Telephone polls generally underrepresent people of color and lower-income persons, and this study was not an exception. This sample overrepresents parents who are white, married, relatively well educated, affluent, regular attendees at religious services, and stable in their residence patterns.

Unfortunately, we did not have the resources to undertake oversampling to ensure that higher numbers of traditionally underrepresented respondents would participate. For example, neither the proportion of Hispanic/Latino respondents nor the absolute numbers were sufficient to draw meaningful, generalizable conclusions about these parenting issues among Hispanic/Latino parents. Nevertheless, the proportion of African American respondents was reasonably close to the proportion of African Americans in the U.S. population.

Moreover, although the sample was well educated and affluent, with 61% of the sample earning \$50,000 per year in household income, those figures should be viewed within the appropriate population context. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that, in 2000, the median income for all households was \$42,148, lower than this sample’s median category of \$50,000 to \$74,999 per year. But the median income for married-couple family households, who made up 86% of our sample, was substantially higher, at \$59,346 (U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). Because we did not ask for specific



Figure 19

### Composition of the 2002 *Building Strong Families* Poll Sample Compared to National Norms

Category		Number of Respondents	Proportion in Sample	National Norms
<b>Total Sample</b>		1,005	100%	
<b>Gender</b>	Female	594	59%	56%
	Male	411	41%	44%
<b>Age</b>	18-34	90	9%	41%
	35-44	377	38%	44%
	45-54	469	47%	13%
	55+	52	5%	2%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	African American	102	10%	13%
	Hispanic/Latino	44	4%	14%
	White	836	85%	67%
<b>Marital status</b>	Married	849	86%	72%
	Unmarried	143	14%	28%
<b>Education</b>	High school or less	303	31%	49%
	Some college	236	24%	27%
	College graduate or more	453	46%	25%
<b>Income</b>	Less than \$25,000/year	64	8%	25%
	\$25,000-\$49,999/year	252	32%	28%
	\$50,000-\$74,999/year	208	26%	21%
	\$75,000 or more/year	276	35%	27%
<b>Attendance at religious services</b>	Weekly or more	597	62%	40%
	At least monthly	141	15%	19%
	Every few months	68	7%	25%
	Special occasions/never	161	17%	16%

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census 2000. Accessed on American Fact Finder at <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>. This should be interpreted to mean that 56% of families with children under age 18 have a female in them, 44% have a male in them.

<sup>2</sup> The Urban Institute, The National Survey of America's Families (1997, 1999). Accessed at <http://trim/urban.org/CrosstabMaker>. The National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) is a nationally representative sample of more than 100,000 people in over 42,000 households gathered in 1997 and 1999.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census 2000. Accessed on American Fact Finder at <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census 2000. Accessed on American Fact Finder at <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (June 2001). America's Families and Living Arrangements. Accessed at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/p20-537.pdf> on August 26, 2002. The educational statistics described here include married-couple families with no children.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (June 2001). America's Families and Living Arrangements. Accessed at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/p20-537.pdf> on August 26, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> The Urban Institute, The National Survey of America's Families (1997, 1999). Accessed at <http://trim/urban.org/CrosstabMaker>. The National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) is a nationally representative sample of over 100,000 people in over 42,000 households gathered in 1997 and 1999. The categories for the *Building Strong Families* are slightly different from the NSAF. NSAF breaks down the information into the following categories: once a week or more, a few times a month, a few times a year, and never.



income amounts (instead, we gave broad income categories from which to choose), we do not know exactly where our median would fall within that \$50,000 to \$74,999 range. But this sample more accurately represents the married-couple family household population that is its appropriate comparison than it does all U.S. households.

The low response rate, combined with comparisons to national benchmarks, shows that the parents in this study are not representative of all American parents. However, the study does offer insights into the perspectives of a large, reasonably diverse sample of parents from many regions of the United States. The most appropriate approach to these data is to consider them a preliminary description that might later be confirmed or disconfirmed in a more truly nationally representative sample with a higher participation rate.

## Identification of Items and Construction of Scales

To generate a pool of survey items, we reviewed several dozen other parent surveys, from previous public opinion polls as well as scholarly studies. We also drew on a diverse advisory group of scholars and practitioners focusing on parenting and family well-being to identify broad areas of priority for study. Finally, we conducted several focus groups with parents and youth to gain a first-hand sense of their goals, strengths, and challenges in parenting. We then developed a survey draft of items that were consistent with the developmental assets framework and the role of parents in building their children's assets (as reflected in Figure 9, page 26), and obtained further recommending about priority items from our advisory group. Final revisions were made in order to keep the telephone survey to a pretested length of about 16 minutes.

**Asset-building actions**—Eleven items made up this scale. Each of the eight categories of developmental assets was represented by at least one item. We asked parents how often—daily, weekly, and so on—they did things such as show love and affection for their child; help their child enjoy learning new things and work hard at schoolwork;

teach their child basic values such as equality, honesty, and responsibility; teach their child to get along with people of different races and backgrounds; and teach their child social skills like understanding the feelings of others. The 11-item scale had an acceptable Chronbach internal consistency reliability of .74.

**Views of success**—We asked three questions about parents' views of parenting "success." One was an open-ended question in which we asked parents to tell us "what is your definition of being a successful parent?" and then content-analyzed the responses. In two other forced-choice questions, we asked parents how often they felt successful (nearly every day, most days, half the time, less than half the time) and how well they feel they deal with the daily challenges of being parents (extremely well, pretty well, just OK or poorly). The latter two items did not have an acceptable alpha reliability (.51), so we treated them as separate items and did not combine them into a scale. However, feeling successful and dealing with daily challenges were moderately correlated with each other (.35). These findings suggest that the two concepts are related and measure some common issues, but that they tap somewhat differing perspectives on parents' perceived performance.

Additionally, we asked how much, when they are not satisfied with something they did as a parent, the reason is because they feel unprepared for the situation, unsupported by family, friends, or community resources, or "just overwhelmed by everything you have to handle." Those three items did not work well together as a scale (unacceptable reliability of .45), and so each was treated separately in the data analysis.

**Time with child**—In addition to the preceding questions on specific positive actions parents can take that can build developmental assets in their children, we asked a single question about how much time parents spend with their child "during an average school day" doing things such as "talking, playing, or just being together." We divided parents into several groups: those who said they spent more than 2 hours a day just being together

with their child, those who spent between 1 and 2 hours a day, and those who spent less than 1 hour per average school day.

**Challenges to parenting**—We asked parents how much six issues “make your job as a parent harder.” They included job demands, financial stress, feeling pressure to buy children things they don’t really need, the overscheduling of their children, conflicts among their children, and being a single parent or not having enough support from the child’s other parent. The alpha reliability of .62 for these items indicates borderline acceptability for research use as a scale.

**Sources of actual and potential support**—Three items dealt with how characteristic it was of parents to “turn to” immediate or extended family, friends, and community resources for “parenting help, advice, or support.” Parents told us whether it was very true, somewhat true, not really true, or not at all true of them. The alpha reliability of .57 indicated that these items did not operate consistently as a scale, and so in our analyses we treated them as separate variables. In addition, we asked a general item about how true this statement was of them: “There is always more for me to learn about being a good parent.”

We asked two different kinds of questions about potential support. One was an open-ended question in which parents were asked to tell us “what kind of help or advice about being a parent do you wish you could have, if any?” The other was embodied in eight questions that tapped how much various potential sources of support could “really help you as a parent,” including: more after-school programs or child-care options; parenting information from books, TV, or the Internet; a more flexible work schedule; friends, neighbors, or extended family spending a greater amount of positive time with the parent’s child; getting advice from their child’s doctor, teacher, or religious leader; going to a parenting class or workshop; talking with other parents about parenting issues; and having other people tell them they are doing a good job as parents. The eight-item scale had an acceptable alpha reliability of .72.

**Parenting post-September 11**—We asked parents to tell us in their own words whether their “role as a parent” had changed since the September 11 attacks on the United States. For those parents saying their role had changed, we asked in what ways. We then content-analyzed the responses.

## Analyses Conducted

Comparisons across subgroups of parents (e.g., by race/ethnicity, marital status, sources of support turn to, etc.) were conducted in two ways. Crosstabulations with chi-square analyses identified significant differences in the proportions of parents responding in specific ways (that is, the distribution of the responses). In addition, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to determine significant mean or average differences among groups. In most cases, differences found to be significant using chi-square analyses also were found to be significant when using ANOVAs. In some cases, however, the chi-square analyses were insignificant but the ANOVAs were significant. This can occur because means are sensitive to extreme responses, which can affect mean differences without having a comparable effect on the distribution of responses.

For communication purposes, we have presented as significant only those results showing significant differences using both methods of analysis. Results described as significant were statistically significant at least at the level of  $p < .05$ . Some statistically significant results were not reported because they included subgroups with cell sizes of less than 20 parents, introducing considerable error into the results.

## Journalistic Interviews with Parents and Program Leaders

In order to illustrate and “bring to life” the statistical information in the quantitative poll of parents, semistructured journalistic telephone interviews were conducted with individual parents and community leaders who are engaged in supporting parents in innovative ways. Interviewees were identified through an informal nomination process with-

in the networks of community initiatives engaged in asset building, through YMCA and Search Institute contacts, and through Internet searches to identify potential innovative programs. Efforts were made to interview a wide range of families (in terms of family composition and racial/ethnic heritage) and family support leaders from multiple communities across the United States.

Interviewees were contacted in advance to sched-

ule an interview at a convenient time. Telephone interviews with 13 parents and 11 community and program leaders were conducted (each approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length) between July and September 2002. Interviewees each consented to their stories, names, and photographs to be used in this report and other settings as part of this project. Their stories, all of which are included in this report, are illustrative, not representative.

## Appendix C

# ***Building Strong Families*** **Telephone Survey Instrument**

*Hello, I'm \_\_\_\_\_ calling from GSG, a national opinion research firm. We're talking with parents all over the country today about important issues in your community, and would like to ask you a few questions on a confidential basis. This is not a sales call. We simply want to know your opinion on some issues of interest. To begin . . .*

1. For classification purposes, are you a parent? (IF YES:) Do any of your children still live at home with you?
2. How many of your children are currently under the age of eighteen?
3. How old was your youngest child at his or her LAST birthday?

*How often would you say you do each of the following things? Is it daily, weekly, monthly, every few months, or hardly ever?*

4. Show love and affection for your child?
5. Help your child to enjoy learning new things or work hard at schoolwork?
6. Ensure your child is active in church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious organization?
7. Teach your child basic values such as equality, honesty, and responsibility?
8. Help your child feel he or she is good at doing something?
9. Encourage your child to help other people, including volunteering in his or her school, congregation, clubs, or community?
10. Teach your child to get along well with people of different races and backgrounds?
11. Teach your child a social skill like how to understand the feelings of others?
12. Ensure your child participates in arts, sports, recreation, or educational programs or activities outside of school?

13. Encourage other adults you respect to spend positive time with your child?
14. Get to know your child's friends?
15. During an average school day, how much time do you spend with your child doing things like talking, playing, or just being together?
  - a. Less than 5 minutes
  - b. 5-30 minutes
  - c. 30 minutes to 1 hour
  - d. 1-2 hours
  - e. More than 2 hours
16. Overall, how well would you say you deal with the daily issues and challenges that come with being a parent?
  - a. Extremely well. Hardly anything ever fazes me as a parent.
  - b. Pretty well. I don't get thrown by much.
  - c. OK. I have my good days and bad days.
  - d. Not very well. I often feel overwhelmed being a parent.
  - e. Poorly. Most times I just don't think I'm up to being a parent.
17. What kind of help or advice about being a parent do you wish you could have, if any?  
(Open-ended)

*When you're not satisfied with something you did as a parent, how much is it because you feel . . . Would that be very much, somewhat, not that much, or not at all?*

18. Unprepared for that situation?
19. Unsupported by family, friends, or community resources?
20. Just overwhelmed by everything you have to handle?
21. What is your definition of being a successful parent? (Open-ended)

22. Overall, how often do you feel successful as a parent?
  - a. Nearly every day
  - b. Most days
  - c. About half the time
  - d. Definitely less than half the time
  - e. Rarely or never
23. How good would you say your relationship is with your current spouse or partner, if applicable?
  - a. Excellent
  - b. Good
  - c. OK
  - d. Needs improvement
  - e. Not at all good
  - f. Does not apply

*Please tell me how true each of the following statements are about you. (IF TRUE OR NOT TRUE: "Would that be very or somewhat true? OR: "Would that be not really true or not true at all?")*

24. I turn to my immediate or extended family for parenting help, support, or advice.
25. I turn to my friends for parenting help, support, or advice.
26. I turn to community resources for parenting help, support, or advice.
27. There is always more for me to learn about being a good parent.

*How much does each of the following make your job as a parent harder? Would that be very much, somewhat, not that much, or not at all?*

28. My child being scheduled into so many activities and or having too much homework.
29. The demands of my job.
30. Being a single parent, or not having any or enough support from my child's other parent.
31. My family's financial situation.
32. The pressure I feel to buy things for my child, even when he or she doesn't really need them.
33. Conflicts, rivalry, or bickering among my children.
34. Has your role as a parent has changed since the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States? (IF YES: How?) (Open-ended)

*Please tell me how much the following things could really help you as a parent. Could they help you very much, somewhat, not that much, or not at all?*

35. More after-school programs or child care options.
36. Parenting information I could get in private, such as books, television, or on the Internet.
37. A more flexible work schedule.
38. People I trust—such as friends, neighbors, or extended family—spending a greater amount of positive time with my kids.
39. Getting advice from my child's doctor, teacher, or religious leader.
40. Going to a parenting class or workshop.
41. Talking with other parents about parenting issues.
42. Having other people tell me I'm doing a good job as a parent.
43. Of these you said VERY MUCH or SOMEWHAT to, which ONE of those could help you the MOST? (READ LIST AND ASK: Which ONE of these could help you the MOST?)

*The following questions are for statistical purposes only.*

44. In which of the following groups is your age?
  - a. 18-24
  - b. 25-34
  - c. 35-44
  - d. 45-54
  - e. 55-64
  - f. 65+
45. What is your current marital status? Are you . . .
  - a. Married?
  - b. Single?
  - c. Separated?
  - d. Divorced?
  - e. Widowed?
46. What is the last grade of formal education that you have completed?
  - a. Less than high school
  - b. High school graduate
  - c. Some college or vocational school
  - d. College graduate
  - e. Post graduate



47. Which of the following best describes your occupation:
  - a. Professional
  - b. White collar
  - c. Blue collar
  - d. Farmer
  - e. Retired
  - f. Unemployed
  - g. Student
  - h. Other
48. What is your average total annual household income? Is it . . .
  - a. Under \$25,000
  - b. \$25,000 to \$34,999
  - c. \$35,000 to \$49,999
  - d. \$50,000 to \$74,999
  - e. \$75,000 or more
49. For most of the time in your family, which of the following statements best describes your family situation?
  - a. I have a hard time buying the things my family needs.
  - b. I have just enough money for the things my family needs.
  - c. I have no problem buying the things my family needs, and we can also buy special things.
50. About how long have you lived in your current neighborhood? Would you say . . .
  - a. Less than one year?
  - b. 1-2 years?
  - c. 2-3 years?
  - d. 3-5 years?
  - e. More than 5 years?
51. What is your religious affiliation?
  - a. Catholic
  - b. Protestant
  - c. Jewish
  - d. None
  - e. Other
52. About how often do you attend religious services?
  - a. Daily
  - b. Weekly
  - c. Every few weeks
  - d. Every month or so
  - e. Every few months
  - f. Only for holidays, weddings, or funerals
  - g. Never
53. What best describes your relationship to the child we have been discussing in this interview?
  - a. I am this child's birth parent and he or she lives with me.
  - b. I am this child's birth parent but he or she does not live with me.
  - c. I am this child's step-parent or adoptive parent.
  - d. I am foster-parenting this child.
  - e. I am this child's grandparent.
  - f. I am this child's legal guardian.
  - g. Other
54. What best describes your child care arrangements for this child?
  - a. This child is old enough not to need child care.
  - b. I stay at home to take care of this child.
  - c. This child is enrolled in Head Start or another preschool program.
  - d. Mostly I have family take care of this child while I am at work.
  - e. Mostly, I have neighbors or friends take care of this child while I am at work.
55. How old is your first child?
56. How old is your second child?
57. How old is your third child?
58. How old is your fourth child?
59. How old is your fifth child?
60. And finally, which of the following best characterizes your main racial or ethnic background?
  - a. White/Caucasian
  - b. Black/African American
  - c. Hispanic/Latino/Latina
  - d. Asian American/Asian
  - e. Other

- A. REGION AREA (FROM SAMPLE)
- B. GENDER (BY OBSERVATION)



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## About Abundant Assets

The Abundant Assets Alliance combines the resources of the YMCA of the USA, YMCA Canada, and Search Institute—three distinguished organizations with proven success in building strong kids, strong families, and strong communities. The alliance seeks to strengthen the capacity of YMCAs and the communities they serve to provide young people with the support and experiences they need to become healthy, caring, and competent adults. Harnessing the power of extensive research on developmental assets—essential building blocks of human development—the alliance partners have developed a holistic, systematic approach to improving young people’s lives that involves the whole community. For more information, visit [www.abundantassets.org](http://www.abundantassets.org).

## About the YMCA of the USA

Chicago-based YMCA of the USA is the national resource office for American YMCAs. Founded in the United States more than 150 years ago, YMCAs are collectively the nation’s oldest and largest charity and human service organization and largest providers of child care. At the heart of community life, the nation’s 2,493 YMCAs serve 18.3 million men, women, and children with programs designed to foster the four core values of caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility. YMCAs across the country offer a variety of programs, such as community service projects and mentoring, literacy and job skill training, welfare-to-work initiatives, substance and juvenile delinquency prevention, family activity nights, kids’ and seniors’ clubs and sports leagues. YMCAs are for people of all faiths, races, ages, and incomes. Financial assistance is available. Visit [www.ymca.net](http://www.ymca.net) for more information.

## About Search Institute

Search Institute is an independent, nonprofit, nonsectarian organization whose mission is to advance the well-being of adolescents and children by generating knowledge and promoting its application. To accomplish this mission, the institute generates, synthesizes, and communicates new knowledge, convenes organizational and community leaders, and works with state and national organizations to support the healthy development of children and youth.

At the heart of the institute’s work is the research-based framework of 40 developmental assets, which are positive experiences, relationships, opportunities, and personal qualities that young people need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. In 1996, Search Institute launched the national Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth initiative to support communities in their efforts to build developmental assets with and for children and youth through the individuals, families, organizations, and networks of a community. To date, more than 500 initiatives have formed in communities across North America. Visit [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org) for more information.

## About Kimberly-Clark

Kimberly-Clark is a leading global consumer products company. Its tissue, personal care and health care products are manufactured in 42 countries and sold in more than 150. Kimberly-Clark is the home of some of the world’s most trusted and recognized brands, including Kleenex, Scott, Huggies, Pull-Ups, Kotex, and Depend. Nearly one-quarter of the world’s population, or 1.3 billion people, use Kimberly-Clark products each year. Kimberly-Clark has been among Fortune magazine’s “Most Admired” corporations since 1983 and was named to its 2002 list of “100 Best Companies to Work For.” For more information about Kimberly-Clark’s well-known brands, visit [www.kimberly-clark.com](http://www.kimberly-clark.com).