Naming and Nurturing the Strengths of LGBTQ+ Youth

Search INSTITUTE

Exploring the Potential of Positive Youth Development to Advance Thriving Among LGBTQ+ Youth

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Executive Summary

Naming—and nurturing—the strengths of LGBTQ+ youth

The bulk of social science research on LGBTQ+ youth has focused on the challenges and risks they face. Though generally accurate and consistent with other groups experiencing marginalization and systemic discrimination, these narratives are only part of the story. Furthermore, leading with the negative narrative—even when intended as an urgent call to action—too often has the unintended consequences of reinforcing harmful preconceptions and stereotypes.

In reality, another positive narrative, though less prominent in the research, focuses on strengths, resilience, hope, and opportunities. Grounded in 40 years of research on positive youth development and equity, this approach recognizes the unique strengths in each and every young person. The data show that, if offered the kinds of supportive nutrients they need, LGBTQ+ youth across all their diversities have the same kinds of capacities to grow, thrive, and contribute to society that other young people have.

Guiding frameworks

This research brief introduces this body of PYD research through Search Institute's frameworks of Developmental Assets and Developmental Relationships.

Developmental Assets: This framework identifies the supports, opportunities, and relationships young people need across all aspects of their lives (called "external assets") as well as the internal skills, commitments, and values they need (called "internal assets") to grow up successfully. Preliminary data on developmental assets show that:

- LGBTQ+, on average, **experience lower levels of almost all of the developmental assets**, when compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth.
- LGBTQ+ youth report **lower levels** of many developmental assets when compared to the general population, with the greatest gaps are in the Positive Identity category, including sense of purpose, self-esteem, and positive view of personal future. Assets where LGBTQ+ youth reported **higher levels** than the total sample: reading for pleasure and creative activities.

Developmental Relationships emphasize that nurturing most assets (and other areas of development) occurs through meaningful, trustworthy relationships within families, with other adults, and with peers. Preliminary data on developmental relationships show that:

- LGBTQ+ youth are somewhat less likely to experience high-quality relationships with parenting adults, friends, teachers, program leaders, and neighbors. However, those gaps are very small.
- LGBTQ+ youth are somewhat less likely, on average, than their straight peers, to experience strength in any of the five elements of developmental relationships.

Scan of the existing research

This brief uses the Developmental Assets Framework to organize and interpret a variety of other studies of LGBTQ+ youth. About 60 sources have been cited with an additional 160 catalogued but not citied due to a lack of alignment with the study purpose, process, frameworks, and goals. Key findings for each category of Developmental Assets are summarized here.

Support: A disproportionate amount of research on LGBTQ+ youth that addresses strengths focuses on support-related assets, particularly family support and other adult relationships, as well as some focus on the critical need for a positive school climate. The research on support focuses primarily on support related to the young

person's coming out and their identity as LGBTQ. Rarely are other dimensions of social support that are typically the focus of research in adolescence examined in published studies with LGBTQ+ youth that we were able to identity.

Empowerment: Though most LGBTQ+ youth do not feel that their community values youth, several community investments or commitments increase LGBTQ+ youth feeling valued, including LGBTQ+-focused community events (e.g., Pride), LGBTQ+-friendly organizations, and gender-neutral bathrooms. The other empowerment asset that is a primary focus of research is safety, focused primarily on their experience of safety based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Boundaries and Expectations: This category of assets is slim in the research on LGBTQ+ youth. Only one study was found that examined parental monitoring or boundaries among LGBTQ+ youth (an area of extensive research in adolescence), and no studies were identified that focused on neighborhood or school boundaries. The studies highlighted focused on mixed expectations experienced by LGBTQ+ youth.

Constructive Use of Time: Creative activities is one of the two assets that LGBTQ+ youth report more that non-LGBTQ+ youth. However, we only identified two studies that focused on the benefits of these activities for LGBTQ+ youth development. Youth programs for LGBTQ+ youth (including GSAs) are widely studied as valuable resources. Faith communities, if they stigmatize and shame the LGBTQ+ community, are often not assets, but sources of trauma for LGBTQ+ youth. Finally, the literature review suggested the possibility of adding an asset in this category focused on *safe, supportive places for LGBTQ+ youth online,* given the vital role these communities can play for many of these youth.

Commitment to Learning: Almost all of the research we identified related to commitment to learning focused on deficits in commitment to learning among LGBTQ+ youth, noting lower levels of school engagement and academic achievement due to chronic victimization and isolation. At the same time, one study noted that LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately placed in gifted, talented, and overperforming school programs.

Positive Values: Almost no studies could be located that examine the values of LGBTQ+ youth (i.e., caring, integrity, honesty, responsibility, restraint), *with the exception of studies focused on online civic engagement and social justice*.

Social Competencies: With the exception of studies based on the Developmental Assets Framework, no studies were identified that examined social competencies among LGBTQ+ youth.

Positive Identity: Formation of a positive identity related to gender and/or sexual orientation is, appropriately, a primary focus of research among LGBTQ+ youth. In addition, several studies address self-esteem as an outcome of positive interventions and positive LGBTQ+ identity.

Emphases, gaps, and future opportunities

This literature scan points to a clear theme: Existing research has focused almost exclusively on the risks and challenges that are real and present in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. If the people and places where young people disclose and develop their identities are accepting, affirming, and supportive, young people are much more likely to do well and avoid a wide range of risks and challenges. But when those people and places instead reject, bully, shame, or otherwise traumatize young people, they undermine their development, reduce the assets they experience, and increase the odds that LGBTQ+ youth will be caught in patterns of high-risk and harmful behaviors and challenges.

The untapped opportunity is to expand research and practice with LGBTQ+ youth to include a broader range of positive youth development factors, or assets, recognizing that LGBTQ+ youth are multi-dimensional individuals who will benefit from a broader, richer base of developmental assets upon which they can more intentionally draw for strength and resilience. Doing so not only has the potential to increase their capacity to be resilient in the face of risks and challenges, it is also likely to increase their quality of life and their path toward thriving, both now and in the future.

Reframing the Narrative about LGBTQ+ Youth

Social science research has disproportionately focused on the challenges and risks that youth face; this focus is even more stark for LGBTQ+ youth. These risks range from the increased odds they will deal with bullying, substance use, and attempted suicide in their teens and 20ths compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth. These challenges drive policy, practice, and research.

Though generally accurate, these narratives are only part of the story, and leading with the negative narrative—even when intended as an urgent call to action—too often has the unintended consequences of reinforcing stereotypes. After decades of work in strategic communications research on public policy issues, FrameWorks Institute researcher Julie Sweetland (2021) noted that "the way we begin a communication has a powerful priming effect, shaping people's interpretation of all that comes after" (p. 9). She continues:

> When we open with a statement of the problem, or even just the name of the issue, we prompt people to call up their existing associations. Concepts such as childhood adversity, child maltreatment, or early traumatic experiences come loaded with misconceptions [that] reinforce stereotypes about marginalized groups and lead people to mismatched solutions. And once these prior associations are brought to mind, we have made our persuasive task harder than it needs to be (p. 9).

In reality, another positive narrative, though less prominent in the research, is just as accurate and offers a powerful alternative. It focuses on strengths, resilience, hope, and opportunities. Grounded in 40 years of research, positive youth development (PYD) is an approach to youth development research and practice that emphasizes young people's capacities and strengths (rather than their risks and deficits) and the importance of intentionally cultivating developmental relationships, experiences, and opportunities across all contexts of their lives in ways that nurture thriving and resilience, benefitting themselves, those around them, and society. If offered the kinds of supportive nutrients they need, LGBTQ+ youth across all their diversities have the capacities to grow, thrive, and contribute to society in the same and in unique ways that other young people do.

Guiding frameworks

This literature scan introduces this body of PYD research in two ways. First, it introduces Search Institute's frameworks of Developmental Assets and Developmental Relationships. These two frameworks represent, broadly, the building blocks of a PYD approach:

- **Developmental Assets** (see Display 1, page 6). Since its creation in 1990, Search Institute's framework of developmental assets is one of the foundational frameworks in the field of positive youth development (Benson et al., 2006). Grounded in extensive research in youth development, resiliency, and prevention, it seeks to identify the supports, opportunities, and relationships young people need across all aspects of their lives (called "external assets") as well as the internal skills, commitments, and values they need (called "internal assets") to grow up successfully.
- **Developmental Relationships** (see Display 2, page 9), introduced in 2013, emphasize that nurturing most of assets (and other areas of development) occurs through meaningful, trustworthy relationships within families, with other adults, and with peers. These relationships are multi-dimensions and bidirectional, with each person in a relationship influencing and benefiting from their relationship with the other person.

After introducing some preliminary data and analysis based on these frameworks, this brief will use these frameworks to organize and interpret a variety of other studies of LGBTQ+ youth. Though many of these studies focused on risks and deficits, many also highlighted protective factors and other dynamics that, when reframed, are aligned with one or both of these PYD frameworks. This allows a shift to focusing on intentionally cultivating these strengths, with the expectation that doing so in a holistic manner will not only help to reduce specific risks, but can also contribute to overall well-being and thriving.

DISPLAY 1

Search Institute's Developmental Assets Framework

EXTERNAL ASSETS

Support

1. *Family support*—Family life provides high levels of love and support.
2. *Positive family communication*—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek parent(s) advice and counsel.
3. *Other adult relationships*—Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
4. *Caring neighborhood*—Young person experiences caring neighbors.
5. *Caring school climate*—School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
6. *Parent involvement in schooling*—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.

Empowerment

7. *Community values youth*—Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
8. *Youth as resources*—Young people are given useful roles in the community.
9. *Service to others*—Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
10. *Safety*—Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.

Boundaries and Expectations

11. *Family boundaries*—Family has clear rules and consequences, and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
12. *School boundaries*—School provides clear rules and consequences.
13. *Neighborhood boundaries*—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
14. *Adult role models*—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
15. *Positive peer influence*—Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
16. *High expectations*—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

Constructive Use of Time

17. *Creative activities*—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
18. *Youth programs*—Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.
19. *Religious community*—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
20. *Time at home*—Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do," two or fewer nights per week.

INTERNAL ASSETS

Commitment to Learning

21. *Achievement motivation*—Young person is motivated to do well in school.
22. *School engagement*—Young person is actively engaged in learning.
23. *Homework*—Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
24. *Bonding to school*—Young person cares about her or his school.
25. *Reading for pleasure*—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

Positive Values

26. *Caring*—Young person places high value on helping other people.
27. *Equality and social justice*—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
28. *Integrity*—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
29. *Honesty*—Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy."
30. *Responsibility*—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
31. *Restraint*—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.

Social Competencies

32. *Planning and decision-making*—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
33. *Interpersonal competence*—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
34. *Cultural competence*—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
35. *Resistance skills*—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
36. *Peaceful conflict resolution*—Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

Positive Identity

37. *Personal power*—Young person feels he or she has control over "things that happen to me."
38. *Self-esteem*—Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
39. *Sense of purpose*—Young person reports that "my life has a purpose."
40. *Positive view of personal future*—Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

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Developmental Assets among LGBTQ+ Youth

Large-scale, integrative research based on these encompassing frameworks is showing the cumulative power of reshaping the approach and the narrative to focus on strengths and relationships among LGBTQ+ youth. We begin by focusing on the developmental assets framework.

The sample

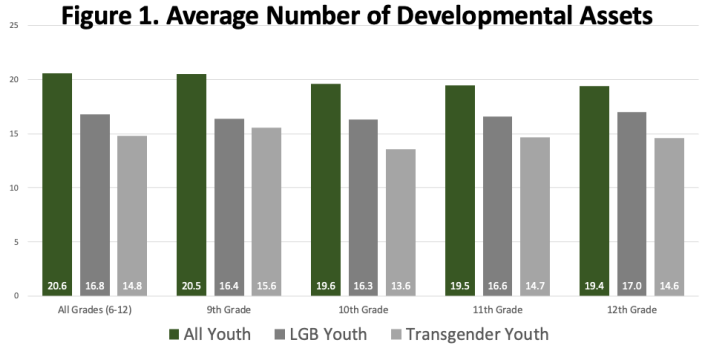
Beginning in 2012, Search Institute has asked youth to report their sexual orientation and gender identity on its anonymous survey, which is administered by schools across the United States. These data provide a glimpse at the sources of support and strength in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth, drawing on a sample of 12,262 LGBTQ+ youth (including 722 transgender youth) that were part of the larger survey sample of 121,157 youth surveyed between 2012 and 2015.

The students were in grades 6 to 12. (The analyses in the following pages focus on those in grades 9 to 12.) The sample also includes youth from a broad spectrum of racial-ethnic backgrounds; About half (53%) identify as white.

Characteristics of the LGBTQ+ Youth Within the Survey Sample

Grade	n =	Race/Ethnicity	n =
6	337	American Indian or Alaska Native	161
7	1,005	Asian American	1,098
8	1,857	Black or African American	860
9	2,184	Hispanic or Latino/Latina	1,129
10	2,835	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	161
11	2,004	White	6,468
12	973	Other	530
		More than one of the above	1,816

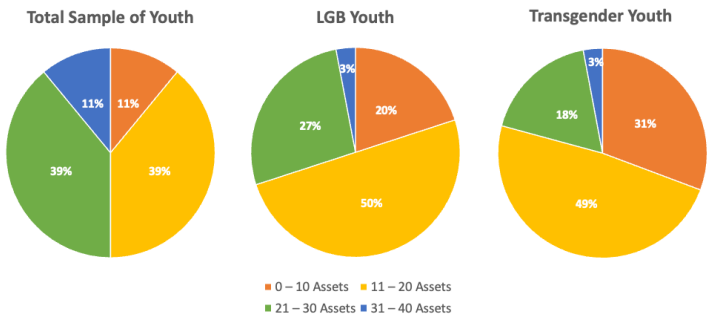
Figure 1. Average Number of Developmental Assets



Prevalence

LGBTQ+ youth experience fewer of the developmental resources, relationships, and personal strengths that are foundational to positive youth development and resilience. LGBTQ+ youth in this U.S. sample report an average of 16.8 assets for LGB youth and 14.8 assets for transgender youth. In the total sample, the average is 20.6 assets. This gap remains consistent from grade 9 through 12 (Figure 1). A national study of 3020 youth in China, which used an adapted measure of developmental assets, found a similar gap between sexual minority youth and other youth in that country (Chan & Lam, 2023).

Figure 2. Levels of Assets Among LGBTQ+ Youth



Average number of assets

In the U.S. sample (Figure 2), LGBTQ+ youth report lower levels of many developmental assets when compared to the general population. The greatest gaps are in the Positive Identity category, including a sense of purpose (gap of 29%), self-esteem (gap of 23%), and positive view of personal future (gap of 18%). However, there were some assets where LGBTQ+ youth reported higher levels than the total sample: reading for pleasure (11% higher) and creative activities (7% higher).

Levels of developmental assets

Another way to understand the differences in experiences of developmental assets is to examine the proportions of youth who experience each level of developmental assets. In this sample, 11% of the total youth population experiences 31-40 of the 40 assets. However, only 3% of LGB and 3% of transgender youth experience this level of developmental relationships. On the other side, 11% of all youth in this sample experience 0-10 of the 40 assets. In comparison, 20% of LGB youth experience 0-10 assets, and 31% of transgender youth experience this lowest level of assets.

Altogether, 50% of youth in the overall sample experience half or fewer of the 40 developmental assets. In comparison, 70% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth experience half or fewer of the assets, and 80% of transgender youth experience half or fewer of the developmental assets.

The potential of assets to reduce risks and promote thriving

The critical question is whether having low levels of developmental assets really matters. Search Institute research (and independent research by other scholars) consistently shows that it does. The adjacent charts (Figures 3 and 4) show the number of risk behaviors and number of thriving indicators that LGBTQ+ youth experience depending on the number of developmental assets they also experience. Consistently, the more assets they experience, the fewer high-risk behaviors they engage in and the more thriving indicators they report.

These charts show concurrent correlational data, which does not show a causal relationship. However, other rigorous, longitudinal studies have shown the same relationships.

Figure 3. Number of 24 High-Risk Behaviors by Asset Levels

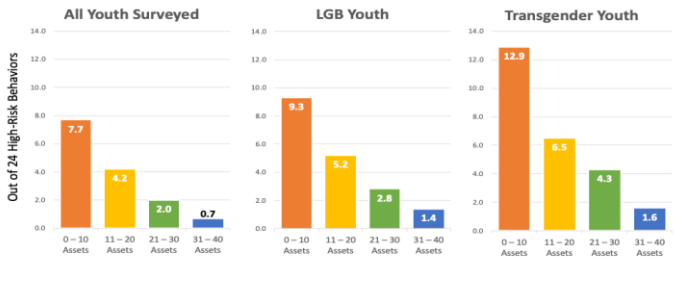
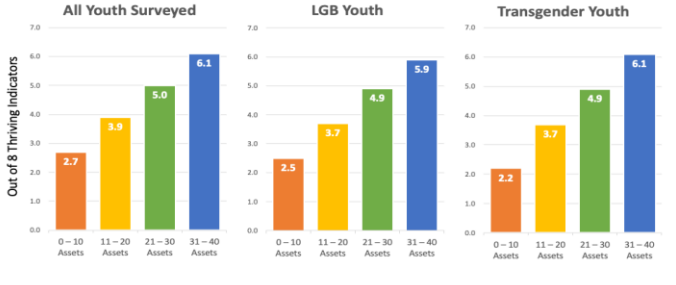


Figure 4. Number of Thriving Indicators by Asset Level



Why does this matter?

It is critical to notice that LGBTQ+ who have cultivated and experience high levels of developmental assets—like other young people with high asset levels—are much more likely than other LGBTQ+ youth to be thriving. They are much less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors (Figure 3), and they are also more likely to be thriving across multiple domains of their lives (Figure 4).

But they are the exception. Overall, LGBTQ+ youth, particularly transgender youth, do not have access to many of the external and internal resources (or assets) that families, schools, and communities are nurturing for, with, and within non-LGBTQ+ youth. These have been undermined by the risks, stigma, and isolation that LGBTQ+ youth experience as well as other factors. It may also be that energy has been focused on the most pressing challenges facing LGBTQ youth, and other "upstream" issues may not have received the attention they needed.

The challenge—and opportunity—is to develop strategies to strengthen the foundation of developmental assets that LGBTQ youth experience. This will include ongoing efforts to dismantle the prejudice and other systemic barriers that exclude them from the resources and supports they need to thrive and be their best selves. Therein lies the promise and possibility of positive youth development.

DISPLAY 2

Percentage of LGBTQ+ Youth Reporting Each Developmental Assets, Compared to the Total Sample

EXTERNAL ASSETS	Total Sample (n = 121,157)	LGBTQ+ Youth (n = 12,262)
Support		
1. Family support	73%	55%
2. Positive family communication	33	21
3. Other adult relationships	52	39
4. Caring neighborhood	38	24
5. Caring school climate	37	26
6. Parent involvement in schooling	32	21
Empowerment		
7. Community values youth	25	12
8. Youth as resources	32	19
9. Service to others	52	48
10. Safety	53	38
Boundaries and Expectations		
11. Family boundaries	46	36
12. School boundaries	57	45
13. Neighborhood boundaries	46	35
14. Adult role models	32	20
15. Positive peer influence	72	59
16. High expectations	57	45
Constructive Use of Time		
17. Creative activities	20	27
18. Youth programs	65	55
19. Religious community	49	36
20. Time at home	64	64

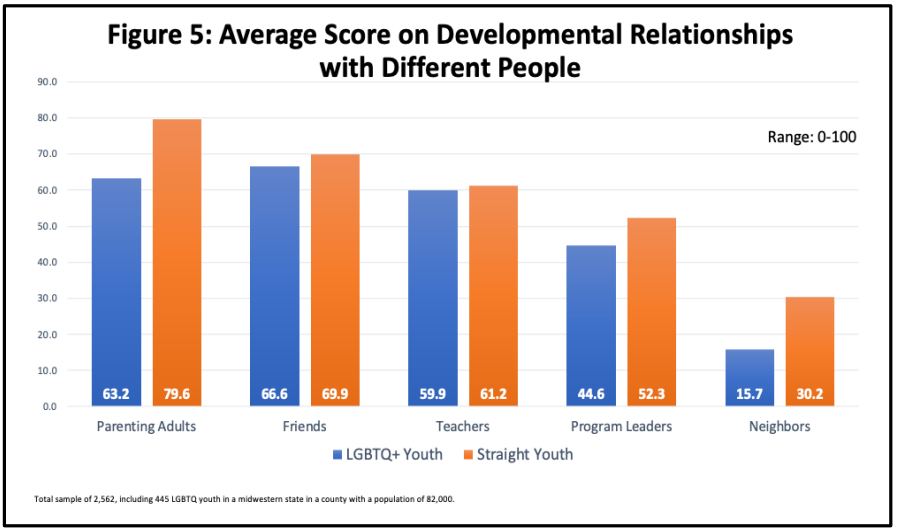
INTERNAL ASSETS	Total Sample (n = 121,157)	LGBTQ+ Youth (n = 12,262)
Commitment to Learning		
21. Achievement motivation	75%	64%
22. School engagement	63	53
23. Homework	54	51
24. Bonding to school	64	50
25. Reading for pleasure	22	33
Positive Values		
26. Caring	58	54
27. Equality and social justice	60	62
28. Integrity	75	75
29. Honesty	71	61
30. Responsibility	70	58
31. Restraint	47	30
Social Competencies		
32. Planning and decision-making	36	26
33. Interpersonal competence	48	45
34. Cultural competence	45	48
35. Resistance skills	48	34
36. Peaceful conflict resolution	49	47
Positive Identity		
37. Personal power	44	28
38. Self-esteem	49	26
39. Sense of purpose	61	32
40. Positive view of personal future	73	55

Source: Aggregate sample of 121,157 youth surveyed by Search Institute between 2012 and 2015 in schools across the United States.

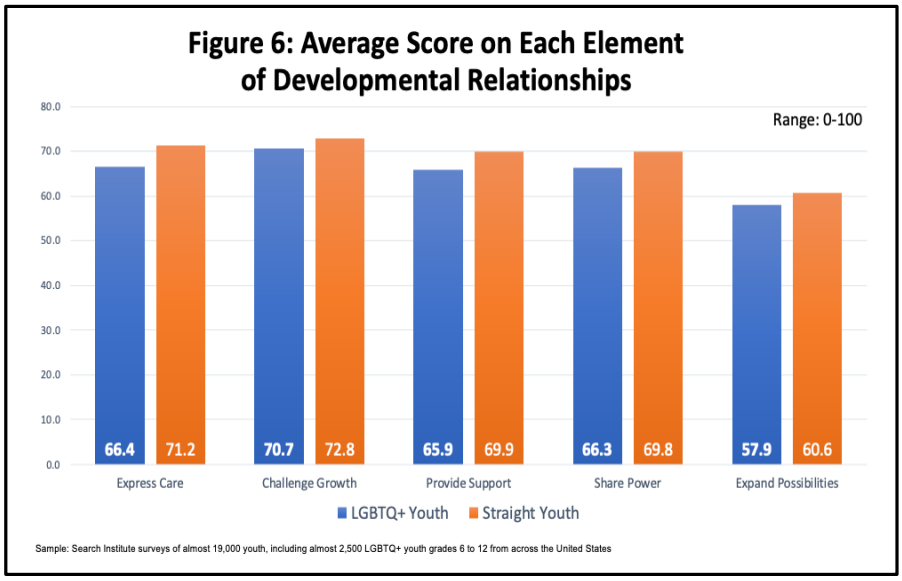
Developmental Relationships among LGBTQ+ Youth

The second framework guiding this literature scan is the developmental relationships framework, which focuses on the interpersonal connections between young people and others, including parenting adults, teachers, peers, coaches, and other adults. This framework (shown in Display 3) identifies 20 actions organized in five elements that represent relationships that are catalytic for growth and development. The framework was built by examining the scientific research, listening to youth and adults who support them describe powerful relationships in their lives, and several studies designed to test and validate the model and the accompanying measures with diverse populations.

Across multiple studies (e.g., Pekel et al., 2018; Scales et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020; and Sethi & Scales, 2020), developmental relationships as defined by this framework have been found to be relevant to diverse groups of young people, including LGBTQ+ youth. A variety of studies have found that developmental relationships, like developmental assets, contribute to academic outcomes (e.g., academic motivation, GPA, and critical thinking skills), social-emotional competencies (e.g., self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills); psychological outcomes (goal setting, self-efficacy, future orientation, and sense of purpose); and resilience in the face of stress and adversity (summarized in Scales et al., 2022).



Broad, multi-state data on developmental relationships among LGBTQ+ youth are not yet available. However, available data show patterns that mirror the data on developmental assets. As shown in Figure 5, LGBTQ+ youth are somewhat less likely to experience high-quality relationships with each of the five "relational targets" identified in the survey. However, those gaps are very small between LGBTQ+ and straight youth in relationships with friends and teachers in one Midwest community. In both cases, the average strength of the relationships is quite similar between the groups.



Similarly, when examining each of the five elements in a developmental relationship (Figure 6), we see that LGBTQ+ youth are somewhat less likely, on average, than their straight peers, to experience strength in any of the five elements of developmental relationships.

DISPLAY 3

The Framework of Developmental Relationships

DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Framework

Developmental relationships are the roots of thriving and resilience for young people, regardless of their background or circumstances. Through these relationships, young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. Just as trees rely on a system of roots to support and nourish them, young people need to experience developmental relationships in their families, schools, programs, and communities. However, too many young people miss these opportunities due to bias, prejudice, and systemic exclusion based on their race, ethnicity, income, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, or other differences. Ensuring that every young person experiences the developmental relationships they need is a vital challenge for the 21st century.

The Developmental Relationships Framework was developed by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN; 800-888-7828; www.searchinstitute.org.

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EXPRESS CARE

Show me that I matter to you.

Be dependable
Be someone I can trust

Be warm
Show me you enjoy being with me

Listen
Really pay attention when we are together

Encourage
Praise me for my efforts and achievements

Believe in me
Make me feel known and valued

CHALLENGE GROWTH

Push me to keep getting better.

Expect my best
Expect me to live up to my potential

Hold me accountable
Insist I take responsibility for my actions

Stretch
Push me to go further

Reflect on failures
Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks

PROVIDE SUPPORT

Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

Navigate
Guide me through hard situations and systems

Advocate
Stand up for me when I need it

Set boundaries
Put limits in place that keep me on track

Empower
Build my confidence to take charge of my life

SHARE POWER

Treat me with respect and give me a say.

Respect me
Take me seriously and treat me fairly

Collaborate
Work with me to solve problems and reach goals

Include me
Involve me in decisions that affect me

Let me lead
Create opportunities for me to take action and lead

EXPAND POSSIBILITIES

Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.

Inspire
Inspire me to see possibilities for my future

Connect
Introduce me to people who can help me grow

Broaden horizons
Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places

Published Research Related to Developmental Assets Among LGBTQ+ Youth

To this point, we have focused on two integrative frameworks from Search Institute: developmental assets and developmental relationships. Each seeks to pull together a number of ideas from the scientific research into a coherent, actionable tool for framing youth development and, subsequently, measurement and practice.

We now turn to the broader research on LGBTQ+ youth that aligns with and deepens specific components of the developmental assets Framework, which adequately represents the foundational literature in the field for the purpose of this project. Although many of these scientific studies focus on young people's risks and challenges, they also offer more nuanced perspectives on developmental assets that are related to those challenges and risks. Therefore, we have scanned these studies to identify factors that are identified in the Developmental Assets Framework. In some cases, these studies highlight additional resources that are specific to LBGTQ youth and are consistent with the broad category of developmental assets, so we have included them. About 60 sources have been cited with an additional 160 catalogued but not citied due to a lack of alignment with the study purpose, process, frameworks, and goals.

This literature scan illustrates that many of the developmental assets are present in the research on LGBTQ+ youth. However, a number appear not to be represented in the existing research (or at least we have yet to find the relevant studies). Our scan of the recent scientific literature was thorough, but not exhaustive, but we found our conclusions to align with the gaps highlighted by other scholars. These gaps suggest that there are rich opportunities to deepen our understanding of the strengths of LGBTQ+ youth, while also identifying opportunities to strengthen and expand the frameworks to recognize the unique lived experiences of these young people.

External Assets[1]

The Framework of Developmental Assets was designed as a set of benchmarks for positive child and adolescent development. It weaves together a wide range of essential developmental "building blocks" that require broad community engagement to ensure their acquisition. The framework enables families, schools, neighborhoods, faith communities, employers, youth organizations, and young people themselves to unite around a common language and employ complementary strategies toward a shared goal—thriving children, adolescents, and young adults. As shown in Display 1, developmental assets fall into two broad groups: external assets and internal assets. Within each of these categories are four categories of human development, resulting in a total of eight categories. A total of 40 individual assets are subsumed within these eight categories.

Support

Young people need to be surrounded by people who love, care for, appreciate, and accept them. These experiences include demonstrative forms of verbal and physical approval, symbolic gestures that young people matter (such as calling them by name, listening, including, paying attention to, talking with, showing interest in), and environments where young people feel welcome, included, and valued. Ideally, support should be abundant both inside and outside one's immediate family and include gestures of care in casual daily interaction with adults and peers. In addition, delivering support should be an intentional value in many places where young people spend time, including schools, youth clubs and organizations, digital spaces, congregations, places of employment and recreation, and neighborhood.

[1] Portions of the introductory material on developmental assets are adapted from Benson (2006).

NOTE: Items in the boxes on the pages that follow are the individual assets and definitions as defined in Search Institute's original framework.

Family support—Family life provides high levels of love and support.

- Discussion of **family support as an asset can be challenging** for many in the LGBTQ+ community. Although estimates vary by gender, race/ethnicity, and gender identity vs. sexual orientation (and appear to be changing over time), about one-third of LGBTQ+ youth have parents who are unsupportive, one-third have supportive parents, and one-third do not reveal their gender identity or sexual orientation to their families at least until early adulthood (Rosario & Schrimshaw, 2013). In addition, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely than other youth to experience distant relationships with parents (Wilson et al., 2011) and physical abuse at home (Friedman et al., 2011).

- Lueng and colleagues' (2022) scoping review of social supports for LGBTQ+ students in schools found that, when present, **family acceptance fostered LGBTQ+ youths' critical thinking and advocacy for safe spaces**. In addition, when youth felt close to and were directly involved in activities with parents, they experienced a greater sense of school belonging and number of reduced risks, including substance use, victimization at school, educational risks, and suicidality.

- Tankersley and colleagues' (2021) systematic review of risk and resilience factors for mental health among transgender and gender nonconforming youth found that, across a majority of studies, the **relationship between these young people and their parent and/or family member(s) promoted resilience,** including reduced odds of depression, suicidal ideation, psychological distress, posttraumatic symptoms, self-injury, and suicide attempts. Parental support was positively associated with life satisfaction and negatively associated with the child's perceived burden of being transgender. Furthermore, one study found that **family connectedness protected against negative mental health problems** more than school connectedness or caring friends.

- **LGBTQ+ youth report lower levels of family support than non-LGBTQ+ youth** (Toomey et al., 2019). That said, LGBTQ+ youth who feel greater parental support are more likely to report better health, less depression, less substance use, less suicide ideation, and greater self-esteem than those who do not experience strong parental support (Katz-Wise et al., 2016). "Although friendship support [during adolescence] is clearly associated with positive well-being in young adulthood, it appears that family acceptance has a stronger overall influence when other forms of support are considered jointly" (Snapp et al., 2015, p. 427).

- Similarly, a study of 245 families found that family support and acceptance played integral roles in adolescents' **mental and emotional health.** It was also related to young people's **life satisfaction, self-esteem, and LGBTQ+ esteem** in young adulthood, after factoring in friend and community support (Snapp et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2019)

- Parental support is associated with **decreased rates of suicide ideation and suicide attempts** among LGBTQ+. This effect may be greater for younger youth (ages 10 to 15) than older youth (ages 16 to 24). However, these studies did not find associations between peer support and lower numbers of suicide attempts (Gorse, 2022).LGBTQ+ youth **who experience lack of acceptance,** low support, or rejection in their family relationships are at greater risk of **suicide, substance abuse, and damage to identity** development (e.g., internalized homophobia; Burningham & Weiler, 2021).

- LGBTQ+ youth were **less likely to smoke** and were more likely to reduce smoking when they experienced strong family support, according to a six-wave, 3.5-year longitudinal study of 248 ethnically diverse LGBTQ+ midwestern youth (ages 16–20 at baseline) (Newcomb et al., 2014).

Positive family communication—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek parent(s) advice and counsel.

The only research we found about parent-adolescent communication with LGBTQ+ youth focused specifically about communication regarding coming out, their identity, and sex-related issues. Nothing appears to address the overall dynamics of communication that are addressed in the broader research on adolescence. Similarly, in their systematic review of parental influence on LGB health and well-being, Bouris and colleagues (2010) wrote:

> A notable gap in the extant literature is the **lack of research on how parental influences identified in the broader empirical literature,** such as parental monitoring or parent–child communication, shape **LGB youth's health.** None of the included articles examined these aspects of parenting, which is a stark contrast to the larger body of research (p. 305).

- LGBTQ+ youth report less open family communications than non-LGBTQ+ youth. Within the LGBTQ+ sample, lesbian/gay youth reported less open family communication than bisexual youth (Toomey et al., 2019).

- Among the sexuality-related topics that gay, bisexual, and queer adolescent (GBQ) males wished their parents would discuss with them were sexual behavior (e.g., anal and oral sex), sexual safety (e.g., consent; sexual coercion by a partner; talking/negotiating boundaries), and online dating. But those are some of the topics about which parents are least likely to talk, according to focus groups of groups of 15- to 20-year old GBQ youth.

  The researchers found that **sex communication between parents and GBQ young men is often "reactive or emotional,"** focusing only on HIV and STDs without talking about other issues of sexual health in the LGBTQ+ community. Most conversations mirrored the kinds of things parents talked about with their heterosexual children, reflecting heteronormative expectations and traditional sexual scripts. This represents "a missed opportunity for parents to teach sons about how to stay safe and how to protect themselves as young men with same-sex attractions and behaviors," particularly since many of the young GBQ men indicated that they would prefer to learn about sexuality issues from their parents (Flores et al., 2021, p. 182; also see Flores et al., 2019).

Other adult relationships—Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.

- LGBTQ+ youth report **lower levels of other adult relationships** than non-LGBTQ+ youth (Toomey et al., 2019). These "other adult relationships" for LGBTQ+ youth can include teachers, coaches, school nurses, counselors, and neighbors, according to a qualitative study of "natural mentoring relationships" with 39 African American, Latino, and European American male youth, ages 15-22, in Chicago. These young men said these adults provided social, emotional, informational, self-appraisal, and unconditional support. The study found that "teachers, counselors, and other school-based personnel are among the most valued adults in the lives of SSA [same-sex attracted] male youth [because] . . . by off-setting the limited availability and/or contact that some SSA youth have with positive SSA role models" (Torres et al., 2012, p. 9).

- A systematic review of studies of **natural mentors (or other adult relationships**) for LGBTQ+ youth found these young people who have a relationship that "grows organically with an older and more experienced adult who already existed within the youth's social network and is not a primary caregiver, immediate family member, friend, peer, or a romantic partner" (Birmingham & Weller, 2021, p. 392) experience a wide range of positive outcomes when compared to LGBTQ+ youth who do not have natural mentors. When these relationships were emotionally close, they were particularly less likely to engage in substance use, suicide ideation, and binge drinking, or experience depression. They were more likely to report high self-esteem and life satisfaction.

- Compared to heterosexual peers, LGBTQ+ youth are less likely to have accepting, supportive, and affirming developmental relationships with adults. **Adult-youth mentoring relationships** in natural contexts are

shown to beneficially affect youth attachment and buffer against the negative health outcomes commonly faced by at-risk youth. Particularly for LBGTQ young people who experienced or feared rejection within their own families, mentors were a welcomed "safe haven" (Burningham & Weiler, 2021).

- **Trusted adults or peers** are most often the sources of referrals when young people enter programs or try out newly discovered resources or supports. Some qualities young people say are signs that a person is trustworthy include their perceived experience, competence, and sensitivity (Wolowic, 2018).

- **Non-parent support through LGBTQ+ centers** was protective for transgender youth against symptoms of depression and internalizing problems, according to Tankersley and colleagues' (2021) systematic review. Those youth who were bullied due to their gender identity and/or expression were much less likely to report self-harm if they reported stronger connections to non-parental adults compared to those who did not report strong relationships with non-parent adults.

- **A network analysis of the non-parent adult relationships** of 175 sexual minority male youth (SMMY), ages 16-20, in Chicago as part of an HIV prevention study (Sterrett et al., 2015) provides a unique view of these relationships with adults who were not caregivers or significant others and were at least seven years older than the youth. The adults were part of the young men's personal networks, and the youth saw them regularly.

  Two-thirds of the SMMYs connected with non-parent adults who shared their racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. However, the youth nominated roughly the same number of women and men as non-parent adults. In addition, most of those selected were heterosexual (58%), compared to 33% who were gay/lesbian, 7% who were bisexual, and 1% who were queer. The researchers found that, in most cases (62%) the relationships involved only social interactions. In others, they involved sex or use of substances.

  Overall, relationship closeness did not vary based on whether each person in the relationship was of the same race/ethnicity. However, the youth (all males) rated relationships with female non-parent adults stronger than relationships with male non-parent adults. They also rated relationships with straight/heterosexual non-parent adults as closer than those with sexual minority non-parent adults.

Caring neighborhood—Young person experiences caring neighbors.

- **Neighborhoods with more support for LGBTQ+ youth** tend to have fewer sexual minority youth who are involved in illegal drug use, including marijuana use and smoking, according to a Canadian study (Watson et al., 2020). The researchers identified supportive neighborhoods as those with more LGBTQ+ organizations, events (such as Pride parades), and programs.

- LGBTQ+ youth who live in Chicago neighborhoods that have a **lower LGBTQ+ assault hate crime rates** are significantly less likely to use marijuana than LGBTQ+ youth in neighborhoods with high LGBTQ+ assault hate crime rates. To strengthen the significance of the findings, the researchers found no associations were found between LGBTQ+ assault hate crimes and marijuana use among heterosexual youth or between sexual minority marijuana use and overall neighborhood-level violent and property crimes. They hypothesized that sexual minority youth may be more acceptable targets of hate crimes in the neighborhoods with higher levels of hate crimes, which may increase stressors and lead to marijuana use as a coping strategy (Duncan et al., 2014).

Caring school climate—School provides a caring, encouraging environment.

- All groups of LGBTQ+ youth are **less likely to report a caring school climate** compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth. This finding comes from a Search Institute study of 116,925 youth ages 11–19, including 11,459 youth (9.8% of the sample) who identified their sexual orientation as something other than "only heterosexual."

Within the LGBTQ+ youth sample, lesbian and gay youth reported lower levels of caring school climate compared to bisexual and youth who identified as mostly lesbian or mostly gay. (Toomey et al., 2019).

- A **caring school climate** is widely considered an important source of support for all students. Much of the research to date among LGBTQ+ youth has focused, however, on the **harmful effects of a negative school climate,** including associations with higher victimization rates, feelings of unsafety, and risks for suicide (Gorse, 2022). Six in ten U.S. LGBTQ+ youth feel unsafe in school due to their LGBTQ+ identities (Kosciw et al., 2018).

- Having **supportive adults in the school** appears to be the strongest influence on a positive school climate for LGBTQ+ students in schools, according to a study of 5,730 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students ages 13 to 21 from across the United States. Other LGBTQ+ supports that contributed to a positive climate included having a gay-straight alliance, an inclusive curriculum, and comprehensive anti-bullying and harassment policies. Each of these contributed positively to LGBTQ+ students' self-esteem and a reduced number of missed days of school (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Parent involvement in schooling—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.

- No substantial differences were found between non-LGBTQ+ youth and lesbian/gay youth on **support through parent involvement in school.** However, compared to bisexual youth, lesbian/gay youth reported greater parental involvement in school (Toomey et al., 2019).

- An important way parents provide support for their LGBTQ+ children is by advocating for them at school, which can include **advocating for gender-inclusive policies, bathroom use aligned with their child's gender identity, appropriate name and pronoun use**—all of which have been associated with lower levels of depression and increased self-esteem among LGBTQ+ youth (Gorse, 2022).

- Resources designed to boost **family support for LGBTQ+ youth in schools** through parent advocacy, allyship, communication, and trust have been found to increase LGBTQ+ youth's academic well-being, safety in school, and their openness in their classrooms (Lueng et al., 2022).

Potential additional SUPPORT asset for LGBTQ youth: Peer Support

Peer support plays a particularly important role in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth (though it is important for all groups of youth), according to a GLSEN study of 5,907 13 to 18 year olds (Palmer et al., 2013), consistent with other research.

- LGBTQ+ youth say they had **first told a friend** about their sexual orientation or gender identity, usually a friend they know in person (64%), though some (12%) said they first told a friend they knew only online. However, in 2013, 29% of LGBTQ+ youth said they were **more out online than in person.**

- Many families become personal guides and allies in helping LGBTQ+ youth **navigate the services and supports they need** as they live into their identities**.** When families are not as supportive, friends typically play a more important role. Friends not only encourage LGBTQ+ youth to take advantage of services, but they often offer to go with their LGBTQ+ friend, make introductions, and try the opportunities together (Wolowic et al., 2018).

Empowerment

A key developmental need for all humans is to be valued and feel valuable. Empowered young people feel good about themselves and their skills. They grow up feeling they are treated with respect, knowing their strengths, and with a sense that they can make a difference in the world. The empowerment assets highlight this need,

focusing on community perceptions of youth and opportunities for youth to contribute to society in meaningful ways. Those experiences of being valued depend on first feeling safe.

- Sexually active transgender and gender expansive adolescents (n = 572) who reported having strength in the **empowerment assets** were significantly less likely to report having multiple sexual partners and having sexual intercourse under the influence of alcohol or drugs, according to an analysis of data from the Minnesota Student Survey (Clark, 2018).

Community values youth—Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.

- Overall, **only 12% of LGBTQ+ youth say they feel valued by their community.** Mostly lesbian/gay and gay/lesbian youth reported slightly higher levels of feeling valued by their community, compared to bisexual youth in an analysis of survey data from 5,680 LGBTQ+ youth (Toomey et al., 2019).

- LGBTQ+ youth who live in **communities with norms and resources that support the LGBTQ+ community** are less likely to engage in substance abuse, according to a multi-faceted analysis of student, community, and school data in 81 Minnesota communities. Among the community supports and norms measured were the number of LGBTQ+-focused community events (e.g., Pride), the presence of LGBTQ+ welcoming organizations (e.g., coffee shops, health care providers, places of worship), percentage of voters who voted against a state constitutional amendment to limit marriage to one man and one woman, and the estimated number of households headed by same-sex couples. When LGBTQ+ youth lived in these communities, they were significantly less likely to smoke cigarettes and to use alcohol (including binge drinking). LBTQ females were also significantly less likely to use prescription and other drugs in these supportive community environments (Eisenberg et al., 2020).

- A common and meaningful way LGBTQ+ youth say they experience being valued and supported in their communities through **events such as Pride festivals and parades,** according to 66 in-depth interviews with diverse LGBTQ+ adolescents in Minnesota, Massachusetts, and British Columbia in 2014-2015. As one participant said of the Pride parade: "A lot of people come. Even non-LGBTQ+ people are on the sidelines and supportive, like, 'You go!' It's definitely empowering" (Eisenberg, 2018, p. 976).

- In an important, though indirect, way, **gender-neutral bathrooms** are more than a practical consideration for transgender youth and adults. LGBTQ+ youth experience them as a sign that they are seen and valued. In in-depth interviews, LGBTQ+ youth (not just those who identify as gender variant) mention gender-neutral bathrooms as important resources that indicate an organizational commitment to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere for everyone, whether through simple signage or expensive renovation (Eisenberg, 2018).

Service to others—Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.

- Most LGBTQ+ youth are **active in civic issues, both online and offline,** according to the 2013 GLSEN study of 5,680 U.S. 13-18 year olds (including 1,960 LGBTQ+ youth (Palmer et al., 2013). Almost nine out of 10 (88%) said they had used the internet for civic purposes. They were about twice as likely as non-LGBTQ+ youth to engage in various online civic activities. For example, in the past year, 76% of LGBTQ+ youth had used the Internet to promote an issue or cause compared to 38% of non- LGBTQ+ youth.

Safety—Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.

- LGBTQ+ youth, on average, felt **most safe at home and at work,** followed by online, though more than one-third did not feel "extremely safe" at home, according to the 2013 GLSEN study of 5,680 U.S. 13-18 year olds (including 1,960 LGBTQ+ youth). LGBTQ+ youth were least likely to feel safe in a place of worship (Palmer et al., 2013). Here are percentages who indicated they felt **extremely or somewhat safe** in different settings:

	Somewhat Safe	Extremely Safe	Combined
Home	23%	61%	84%
Work	34%	47%	81%
Online	41%	32%	73%
School	37%	34%	71%
To and from school	35%	35%	70%
Place of worship	19%	47%	66%

- All young people (heterosexual and LGBTQ+ peers) were at greater risk for suicidal behavior when they reported feeling unsafe in home, school, or in their neighborhood (Toomey et al., 2019).

- Among transgender and gender non-conforming high school students, **perception of school safety** protected against depression, repetitive self-injury, and suicidality, Tankersley and colleagues (2021) reported in their systematic review.

- Intersecting identities for LGBTQ+ students make youth even **more likely targets of discrimination** at school. LGBTQ+ students of color, non-Christian-identifying youth, or perhaps youth with low SES, have to manage both the hostile environment and harassment for the LGBTQ+ identity. Moreover, these youth are additionally marginalized due to racism, religious discrimination, or classism (Abreu et al., 2016).

- An ASCA (2014) report emphasizes the **counselors' role** in the **well-being of LGBTQ+ youth** by stating that school counselors should "promote awareness of issues related to sexual orientation/gender identity among students, teachers, administrators, parents and the community", and "promote policies that denounce the use of offensive language, harassment, and bullying that lead to a hostile school environment."

- LGBTQ+ youth **actively look for symbols of safety** and acceptance when they start looking for information, connections, and support in organizations, classrooms, and with supportive adults. These symbols help them assess whether they can be themselves (Wolowic et al., 2018).

Boundaries and Expectations

Support and empowerment need to be balanced with clear, consistent attention to boundaries, boundary reinforcement, and encouragement to do their best. Important here are clear messages about what is in-bounds and what is out-of-bounds. Ideally, the norms that guide appropriate behavior and the consequences that accrue should build out of a shared core of messages that are reinforced in settings as diverse as families, neighborhoods, schools, congregations, digital communities, and clubs, teams, and other youth-serving organizations. These systems of boundaries should encompass family standards, school, neighborhood, and community policies and norms, and extend to clear, visible efforts to communicate positive expectations of young people's success that recognize the pluralism of ideas and values also present in a diverse society.

Compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth, LGBTQ+ youth experience **fewer family, school, and neighborhood boundaries,** according to an analysis of Search Institute's dataset of 116,925 U. S. youth, ages 11–19, including 11,459 LGBTQ+ youth (Toomey et al., 2019).

Family boundaries—Family has clear rules and consequences, and monitors the young person's whereabouts.

- **Parental monitoring** involves paying attention to a young person's behaviors, activities, and whereabouts, and whether the young person discloses information and the parent seeks it. An extensive body of research supports the value of monitoring as protecting children and youth from high-risk behaviors and promoting positive behaviors. Yet **parental monitoring has rarely been the focus of research with LGBTQ+ youth**,

though they typically are engaged in higher levels of risk behaviors than other youth. Montano and colleagues' (2017) longitudinal study of parental monitoring through surveys of 247 girls, ages 14–19 (half of them sexual minority girls, or SMG), found the following:

- SMGs disclosed less to their parents than did heterosexual girls. Their perceptions of parents' knowledge about their lives were also lower than heterosexual girls. These patterns were similar for both SMGs who were "out" and not "out" to their parents.
- SMGs were less likely than heterosexual girls to truthfully disclose their behaviors to their parents.
- Consistent with other research, disclosure of both activities and whereabouts tended to decline with age for both groups of girls.
- Parental knowledge of SMGs initially increased, but then decreased as the girls got older. Parental knowledge just declined gradually as heterosexual girls aged. (The initial increase in knowledge among parents of SMGs may be related to the girls coming out to their families.)

School boundaries—School provides clear rules and consequences.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth.*

Neighborhood boundaries—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth.*

Adult role models—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.

- Having **accessible role models** who affirm LGBTQ+ identity has the potential to expose LGBTQ+ youth to positive norms, behaviors, and expectations, helping them see their sexuality and/or gender identity as positive. Almost 60% of almost 500 ethnically diverse, 16–24 year old LGBTQ+ youth in Chicago said they had a role model. Younger youth (ages 16– 19; 66%) were more likely to say they had a role model compared to older youth (ages 20–24; 55%). There were no significant differences by gender or race/ethnicity.

  The LGBTQ+ youth named a **wide range of role models,** including one-third who were accessible (such as parents, other family members, friends, or other adults such as a teacher); political/community leaders; 60% who were inaccessible, including singers/musicians (e.g., Beyonce, Janet Jackson), actors/entertainers (Oprah, Ellen DeGeneres); and the rest who may or may not be accessible.

  The researchers raised concerns about the relatively low proportion of these youth who have an accessible role model. They wrote: "When LGBTQ+ youth can only identify non-proximal role models in their lives, the inaccessible role model may become a stark reminder that the youth does not have anyone in their lives that can understand them or accept them for who they are, exacerbating feelings of isolation and loneliness" (Bird et al., 2012, p. 356).

Positive peer influence—Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.

- In the Support category (above), **Peer Support** is noted as a potentially new asset to add, given the particular significance of peer support in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. The importance of peer support is clear in the research; however, there is a dearth of research focused specifically on positive peer influence. In fact, to date, we have not identified any studies with this specific focus. There are some studies that use peer-led programs to influence attitudes toward LGBTQ+ youth (e.g., Kroneman et al., 2019), but we have

not yet surfaced studies that examine positive peer influence (instead of peer "support") among LGBTQ+ youth.

High expectations—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

- Labels can affect **LGBTQ+ youth's expectations.** Compared to cisgender peers, **transgender youth were less likely to aspire to go to college. Lesbian and gay young people were less likely to aspire to college** compared to youth with more "emergent identity labels" (e.g., asexual, queer). Gay-Straight Alliance clubs and LGBTQ+-supportive teachers were related to increased odds of aspiring to college in all LGTBQ youth sampled (Feldman et al., 2022).
- Despite challenging school environments, LGBTQ+ students have **similar or higher educational aspirations as their peers.** More than 9 out of 10 LGBTQ+ high school students plan to attend college, compared to 70% of high school students who plan to go to college. These aspirations are key factors in how LGBTQ+ students make educational plans and set career goals (Wimberly et al., 2015).

Constructive Use of Time

Involving young people in structured, relational activities and programs is vital for positive development. When designed well, these are opportunities for young people to learn and develop new skills and interests with other youth and adults. They connect with caring adults and peers who nurture skill and capacity through group activities, lessons, relationships, and supervision. They learn to lead and to make a difference.

Creative activities—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.

- In in-depth interviews, LGBTQ+ youth often talk about **arts activities as safe and welcoming places** for them in their communities (as are social justice and volunteering organizations). Not only did they often find other LGBTQ+ youth participating, but the non-LGBTQ+ youth tended to be welcoming and supportive of diversity. These organizations and groups often also "used certain practices that indicated they were sensitive to a range of experiences and identities, such as issuing trigger warnings (i.e., an alert of potentially upsetting content) before a poetry slam, or eschewing traditional gender norms" (Eisenberg et al., 2018, p. 976)
- Artistic expression and production processes provide rich venues for positive youth development, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth as they strive towards developing a positive identity. Young people can **express and explore the complexities of their identities through the arts**: for example, LGBTQ+ youth can create and "try on" multiple identities through theater, giving them freedom to discover new and different ways of being through play (Halverson, 2010).

Youth programs—Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.

- Research shows there is **a dearth of programs specifically catered to LGBTQ+ youth**. Additionally, program accessibility remains a concern for LGBTQ+ youth in communities and families with low acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities (Burningham & Weiler, 2021).
- **Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)** appear to have multiple benefits in schools:
    - They support those who participate, as you might expect. In addition, they counterbalance broader systems of equality and help to create a more accepting environment in the school. Sexual minority students who attend schools with GSAs reported experiencing suicidality less frequently than students who attend schools without GSAs (Walls et al., 2010).

- An interview-based study of GSAs in the United States and Canada found that the organizations functioned as communities for LGBTQ+ youth in three important ways. First, they provided a source of **emotional connection and social support.** They created a sense of **membership**. And, third, they **fulfilled the needs** of members. In addition, the GSAs were important gateways to **strong adult connections,** access to resources, and access to the broader LGBTQ+ community (Porta et al., 2017).
- LGBTQ+ students who attend schools with GSAs and with supportive teachers and staff are more likely to **want to attend college** compared to their peers in schools without these supports (Feldman et al., 2022).
- LGBTQ+ students in schools with GSAs were significantly less likely to feel unsafe, experience homophobic victimization, or hear homophobic remarks, according to a **meta-analysis of 15 primary studies of GSAs** with 62,923 participants (Marx & Kettrey, 2016).

- **Youth organizations that specifically serve LGBTQ+ youth** are important sources of peer support, mental health services, sexual health services, access to safe housing, and other resources, according to LGBTQ+ youth who were part of in-depth interviews in Minnesota, Massachusetts, and British Columbia. They are places where these youth can feel safe, hang out, and not worry about being judged. They also know staff will be competent in working with the LGBTQ+ youth population (Eisenberg et al., 2018).

Religious community—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.

- When asked about community resources in in-depth interviews, LGBTQ+ youth, many had **strong, and mixed, experiences in religious communities.** Many comments about "the church" in general were "consistently negative," with some youth indicating that their own religious community was not at all supportive. "I was excommunicated basically," one said. However, others described how their congregation had become a safe and inclusive space, with welcoming clergy, LGBTQ+-specific activities, and supportive congregational value as examples of how they were valuable, affirming places for them and their friends (Eisenberg, 2018, p. 977).
- In a systematic literature review of religiosity among transgender youth, Lekwauwa and colleagues (2020) found that youth experienced **worse mental health outcomes** when faced with **religiously motivated stigma** from families and communities. However, youth whose **spirituality was intrinsically motivated** reported improved **psychological wellbeing.**
- Religious affiliation is neither a protective factor nor detrimental to LGBTQ+ youth on its own. Rather, regardless of religious affiliation, family acceptance was more of a determining factor for youth mental health outcomes than religious affiliation alone (McGraw, et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2020).

Time at home—Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do," two or fewer nights per week.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth.*

Potential additional CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME asset for LGBTQ+ youth: Online Communities

LGBTQ+ youth spend more time online, and they use more online resources than non-LGBTQ+ youth. These online resources are uniquely important sources of friendship, support, and information, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth who may not be ready or able to share their identities with their families or in their communities as well as for those without access to an in-person LGBTQ+ community due to distance or cultural norms (Palmer et al., 2013).

- LGBTQ+ youth are more than twice as likely as non-LGBTQ+ youth to have at least one friend online (50% vs. 19%, respectively). Two-thirds of LGBTQ+ youth connect to other LGBTQ+ youth in a given year (Palmer et al., 2013).
- Most LGBTQ+ youth who do not have GSAs, supportive communities, out peers, or close friends report that they use the Internet to connect with other LGBTQ+ people (Palmer, et al., 2013).
- LGBTQ+ young people were more likely than their heterosexual peers to have **online friendships,** and reported feeling more emotionally supported within these friendships than in their in-person friendships (Ybarra et al., 2015).
- Online spaces help LGBTQ+ youth **create a network of friends** with whom they can be open about their LGBTQ+ identity or identities, which may be particularly important for those who are not safe or comfortable being out offline.
- Compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely than to have friends they only know online. They tend to **rate these online friendships as more supportive** than their in-person friendships (Hiller et al., 2012; Ybarra, 2015).
- However, **peer support online does not appear to be protective** against victimization or harassment either online or in-person (Ybarra, 2015). Another longitudinal, 3.5-year study of 248 ethnically diverse LGBTQ+ youth found that having supportive friends online was also not protective against smoking. LGBTQ+ youth smoked more when they had relationships with other smokers (Newcomb et al., 2014).

Internal Assets

Little research has examined the wide spectrum of internal assets among LGBTQ+ youth. The existing research focuses primarily on identity development, finding that "that identity disclosure of a sexual minority identity is associated with more positive young adult outcomes" (Toomey et al., 2019, p. 3).

Commitment to Learning

Young people need a sense of the lasting importance of learning and a belief in their own abilities. These commitment-to-learning assets have a dual power: they are crucial in the long run for vocational success and engaged citizenship, and they also play a prevention role, inhibiting some forms of health-compromising behavior. Commitment to learning has a number of sources in the journey through childhood and adolescence. Parental attitudes, encouragement, involvement, and modeling are key. And the quality of schooling—through both its formal and informal curricula—matters. Norms that encourage high attention to educational tasks, by both peer group and community, are also instrumental. Unfortunately, many young people do not benefit from these kinds of expectations.

The research on academic engagement among LGBTQ+ youth focuses only on the educational gap between LGBTQ+ youth and other youth, highlighting the deficits, oppression, and trauma they face that makes it difficult for them to engage with learning or to achieve in school. Little, if any, attention is given to the cultivation of internal strengths, such as a commitment to learning, that are foundational for positive development. As Wimberly (2015): "Unfortunately, much of what we know about LGBTQ+ research in a school or educational context depicts the challenges and often negative experiences of LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and school administrators" (p. 240).

Achievement motivation—Young person is motivated to do well in school.

- Research on **achievement motivation among LGBTQ+ youth** focused on factors that undermine motivation. For example, Poteat, Scheer, and Mereish (2014) argue that chronic victimization partly explains academic disparities. They write that short-term stressors, such as a brief illness, may affect performance temporarily, but students can improve quickly. However, chronic victimization affects learning across multiple days and weeks, not only affecting assignments and tests, but compounding learning loss when new material builds on past material. Ultimately, this ongoing, compounding stress makes it more difficult for LGBTQ+ youth to be motivated or to engage academically, undermining their school success and advancement.
- Based on this same theory, Aragon and colleagues (2014) found (in a study of 11,447 high school students in 20 schools) that **LGBTQ+ students had higher rates of truancy,** earned lower grades, and had lower educational intentions, including not expecting to finish high school or attend a four-year college. These researchers found that "**supportive school environments**, free from homophobic victimization, consistently emerge as key for the development of a secure identity and positive sense of self for LGBTQ youth" (p. 11).
- **As a counterfactual,** many LGBTIQ+ youth are **labeled "gifted," "talented," and "overperforming,"** which leads them to be placed into classes in which they read more books and are with peers who read. Ninety-five percent of LGBTQ+ youth in one study said they intended to go to college and had no concerns about academics (Wexelbaum, 2019).

School engagement—Young person is actively engaged in learning.

- A study of 11,288 high school students confirmed that sexual minority students, particularly boys, **feel less connected to and more isolated in their schools,** and they do experience more emotional distress than other students. All of these factors can make it harder to pay attention in class and complete assignments.

However, analyses find that these school-related factors do not adequately explain a great deal of the educational disadvantage that sexual minority male students face. Other yet-to-be-measured factors seem to be playing significant roles (Pearson et al., 2007).

- **The minority stress model** (Meyer, 2003) sought to explain "the social, psychological, and structural factors accounting for mental health inequalities facing sexual minority populations" (Frost & Meyer, 2023, p. 1). It has been used to describe the multiple stressors in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth that can undermine achievement motivation, school engagement, and academic performance. These include heightened vigilance to ensure physical safety, **which takes away time and energy from other educational tasks**, including abstract reasoning, problem-solving, and simultaneous consideration of multiple pieces of information (Poteat et al., 2014).

- Despite growing understanding of the critical need to provide more **support for LGBTQ+ students in secondary schools,** a study that tracked the adoption of eight practices to support sexual minority youth found that only one practice (identifying safe space for LGBTQ+ youth) increased in most states from 2010 to 2014. Of the remaining, only one (preventing harassment based on a student's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity) had relatively high rates of adoption (a median of 90% of schools) across all states.

  Other practices included having a student-led club for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., GSA); professional development for staff; access to health services for LGBTQ+ youth; social and psychological services for LGBTQ+ youth; professional development for health education teachers on LGBTQ+ issues; and providing curricula or supplementary materials that included HIV, STD, or pregnancy prevention information relevant to LGBTQ+ youths. (Demissie et al., 2018).

Homework—Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth.*

Bonding to school—Young person cares about her or his school.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Reading for pleasure—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.

- Relatively little is known about the **reading interests and habits of LGBTQ+ youth.** Traditional studies of reading habits do not collect data on sexual orientation or gender identity, and "research articles written for and by librarians on traditional LGBTIQ+ collection development for youth often do not include qualitative or quantitative evidence of the reading preferences of their young LGBTIQ+ patrons" (Wexelbaum, 2019, p. 114). The available research suggests that:
  - **Identity development is a major motivator** for the reading habits of LGBTQ+ youth. Reading introduces them to people who are like them, role models, and safe places.
  - For some LGBTQ+ youth, **reading can be an escape from hostility** (Wexelbaum, 2019).

Positive Values

For many observers, the nurture of prosocial values is a critical societal challenge. Though there is contention about which values to emphasize, some values are affirmed by the vast majority of people across multiple identities, including age, income, race-ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or politics. Among them are

caring for others, honesty, and responsibility. The positive-values assets emphasize these widely shared values that are also associated with positive developmental outcomes for young people.

- Caring and social justice values were associated with lower risk for suicidal behavior in bisexual adolescents, though not for other sexual minority youth, according to analyses of Search Institute assets data (Toomey et al., 2019)

Caring—Young person places high value on helping other people.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Equality and social justice—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.

- LGBTQ+ youth tend to be quite active in **advancing social justice online**. Indeed, a study of 571 LGBTQ+ youth found that only 6% of the youth surveyed said they did not engage in any web-based LGBTQ+ civic engagement, and, on average, they spent half their time on social media engaged in social justice activities. However, although this online involvement increases social support, it also tends to increase exposure to heterosexist and transphobic content, which increases mental health risks (Tao & Fisher, 2023).

Integrity—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Honesty—Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy."

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Responsibility—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Restraint—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Social Competencies

Young people need the skills to interact effectively with others, to make difficult decisions, and to cope with new situations. Many of these skills are the focus of social-emotional learning and related approaches. These skills are not only essential for learning, social, emotional, and other areas of development, but they are also vital for preventing substance use and other forms of high-risk behaviors. While these competencies can be developed in the adult years, the chances for manifesting these assets in adulthood are greatly increased when communities pay attention to their development in childhood and adolescence.

Planning and decision-making—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.

- Toomey, Syvertsen, and Flores (2019) found that **planning and decision-making skills** were associated with **lower risk for suicidal behavior** for LGBTQ+ youth.
- *No additional studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Interpersonal competence—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Cultural competence—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Resistance skills—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Peaceful conflict resolution—Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Positive Identity

Identity formation is one of the critical tasks of adolescence, as young people ask: "Who am I? What can I do? Who do I want to become?" This eighth category of assets focuses on young people's views of themselves—their own sense of power, purpose, and promise. These assets help young people believe in their own self-worth and feel that they have control over the things that happen to them, giving them a sense of initiative, direction, and purpose.

Identity development is a central task of adolescence, and it **can be particularly challenging for LGBTQ+ youth,** particularly when they navigate this task without (or with limited) support from family, friends, and society—or even open hostility and discrimination. Multiple factors shape identity development, and multiple pathways and models have been identified by various scholars. Through a study of 169 LGB youth and young adults, Bregman and colleagues (2013) identified two broad patterns of identity formation. The first (and most common) was an affirmed identity pattern, which showed little internal uncertainty, low levels of difficulty with coming out to friends and family, and minimal concerns about being accepted. Less common was the identity struggles pattern, in which youth expressed more concerns about all of these dimensions. In both patterns, youth were interested in maintaining appropriate privacy about their sexuality (Bregman et al., 2013).

- Developing a **positive identity as an LGBTQ+ person** occurs as a transactional process through interactions with others. A study with 200 sexual minority male youth ages 16 to 24 living in Chicago found that this process occurred most commonly with other LGBTQ+ persons and with supportive non-LGBTQ+ friends. . Social support from family members played a less significant role. These positive interactions buffeted the

negative effects of experiencing and internalizing sexual orientation stigma, which were both associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms (Bruce et al., 2015).

- Among transgender and gender expansive adolescents, **positive identity** was negatively related to having multiple sexual partners, according to analysis of the Minnesota Student Survey (Clark, 2018).

Personal power—Young person feels he or she has control over "things that happen to me."

- LGBTQ+ youth who are seeking support and resources feel a greater sense of self-agency or personal power when the **available resources are interconnected** and there is a greater density of the different kinds of links they encounter close together. This way they can find what they need without having to ask for help, thus building their own confidence and sense of self-efficacy (Wolowic et al., 2018).

Self-esteem—Young person reports having a high self-esteem.

- **Self-esteem** measures have been widely used in studies of LGBTQ+ **mental health, victimization, bullying, other risks, and protective factors**. According to McDonald's (2018) literature review, perceived social support is consistently associated with higher levels of self-esteem as an indicator of adolescent well-being. LGBTQ+ youth who participate in support groups such as GSAs typically have higher self-esteem.
- Hall's (2018) systematic review of 35 studies of the psychosocial factors related to depression among LGBQ youth, ages 15 to 24, found that **self-esteem was a prominent protective factor across** multiple studies. Consistent with the additive nature of developmental assets, Hall (2018) elaborates on the significance of this finding on self-esteem:

> Taken together that having a positive LGBQ identity and global self-esteem are protective against depression, self- and identity-focused interventions may need to target problematic self-concepts related to LGBQ identity and highlight that being LGBQ is just one of many parts of one's identity. Having multiple self-aspects and a positive, holistic sense of self may mitigate the effects of stressors from a single domain of one's self or identity. . . . Integrating one's LGBQ identity with other identities to achieve identity synthesis can moderate the impact of LGBQ-specific stressors and mental health outcomes (p. 299).

Sense of purpose—Young person reports that "my life has a purpose."

- *No studies have been identified that focused on this asset specifically among LGBTQ+ youth. Research on school climate indirectly addresses bonding to school.*

Positive view of personal future—Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

- This asset reflects concepts such as **hope, goal orientation, and future-oriented thinking**. Moe and colleagues (2023) found that hope contributes uniquely to predicting suicidal behavior among LGBTQ+ young people, after controlling for other known contributors, including group identity, minority stress, depression, and social support. Earlier research found that hope was positively related to developing a positive gay identity and negatively related to internalizing stigma related to sexual minority status.

Potential additional POSITIVE IDENTITY asset for LGBTQ+ youth: Gender and/or Sexual Orientation Identity

- When it comes to **gender and/or sexual orientation identity**, peers tend to offer more social support than others, including parents (Gorse, 2022).

- LGBTQ+ youth generally saw their **LGBTQ+ identities as both positive and flexible**, according to focus groups and interviews with 52 LGBTQ+ youth and 11 straight allies, ages 14 to 24. Rather than being a source of confusion or instability, they saw it as a way to exercise control over their self-identity and how they present themselves to others. On the negative side, some felt a need to hide their identities from other people, including teachers and members of the broader community. Some were afraid of being "outed" by others, while others worried about rigid gender roles. In order to cope with some of these challenges, young people described "developing a sense of self-acceptance, which included understanding themselves as unique, and learning how to be comfortable with themselves" (Higa et al., 2012).

Developmental Relationships[2]

Young people are more likely to grow up successfully when they experience developmental relationships with important people in their lives. Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. Search Institute has identified five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people's lives. The actions within each element are certainly not exhaustive of all the ways developmental relationships are expressed; therefore, additional actions may be added or changed through future research or in relationships within particular populations and cultures.

However, because of the limited literature, the conceptual overlap between the themes in developmental assets and developmental relationships, and the scope constraints of this particular literature scan, we have limited the annotation of this literature review to the Developmental Assets Framework. Based on what we have identified so far, we are not confident that we will find a robust literature base focused specifically on LGBTQ+ youth beyond some of the broad elements, particularly Express Care and Provide Support (which are somewhat duplicative with developmental assets). In the future, we may want to delve more deeply into these relational elements, focusing separately on different relationships (parenting adults, peers, teachers, etc.).

Express Care

Express Care focuses on the emotional bond, mutual enjoyment, self-disclosure, and trust that demonstrate how each person is committed to and invested in the other. This section highlights studies related to specific actions within the Express Care element of the Developmental Relationships Framework.

(This element aligns with "support" in developmental assets.)

Challenge Growth

Challenge Growth emphasizes the ways that people in relationships hold each other accountable to follow through in pursuing their own goals and commitments while also helping them learn and grow from mistakes or setbacks.

(This element aligns with "boundaries and expectations" in developmental assets.)

Provide Support

Provide Support focuses primarily on instrumental support (more than emotional support, which conceptually is housed more within the element of Express Care), or the practical ways people help each other to get by, overcome obstacles, and work toward goals.

[2] Portions of the introductory material on developmental relationships are adapted from Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Houltberg, 2022.

(This element also aligns with "support" in developmental assets. The "boundaries" action aligns with "boundaries and expectations.")

Share Power

Sharing power builds on the notion of optimal dyadic interactions in which "the balance of power gradually shifts in favor of the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 60). In the Developmental Relationships Framework, sharing power starts with mutual respect and inclusion in decision making, and extends to collaboration and opportunities for young people to take action and lead as capabilities and opportunities present themselves.

(This element aligns with "Empowerment" in developmental assets.)

Expand Possibilities

The final element in the Developmental Relationships Framework, Expand Possibilities, proposes that close relationships open pathways by inspiring young people to see new possibilities for themselves, exposing them to new ideas, experiences, and places, and introducing them to people who can help them explore and grow. Trusting relationships broaden young people's access to ideas and resources beyond the relationship.

(This element aligns with "Constructive Use of Time" in developmental assets.)

Emphases and Future Opportunities

This literature scan points to clear a clear, central theme that would unlikely change at the macro level with a more comprehensive review: Existing research has focused almost exclusively on the risks and challenges that are real and present in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. The focus of the majority of the studies cited is a particular risk or deficit faced by LGBTQ+ (or a subgroup with this population); the assets are identified by working backwards to identify the protective factors for those risks.

Emphasis in Existing Research

What becomes evident after scanning multiple studies is that **young people are much more likely to do well** (socially, emotionally, academically, etc.) and avoid a wide range of risks and challenges if the people and places where young people disclose and develop their identities are **accepting, affirming, and supportive.** That pattern is evident in families, schools, faith communities—and, in all likelihood, in any setting where the study is undertaken.

As a corollary, when those people and places instead reject, bully, shame, or otherwise traumatize young people, they undermine their development, reduce the assets they experience, and increase the odds that LGBTQ+ youth will be caught in multiple patterns of high-risk and harmful behaviors and challenges, including suicide ideation, attempts, and completions, substance use and abuse, depression and self-harming activities, and many others.

Two Opportunities for the Future

The untapped opportunity, then, is twofold:

1. The first is to expand research with LGBTQ+ youth to **examine the role of a broader range of positive youth development factors, or assets, in LGBTQ+ youth development,** resilience, and thriving. In addition, there well may be **additional assets, unique to LGBTQ+ youth and communities,** that need to be identified and measured to gain an even greater sense of the strengths within this community of youth.

2. The other opportunity is to use these frameworks—developmental assets and developmental relationships, as **guides to begin enriching and expanding the opportunities available for LGBTQ+ youth.** How might other assets within the framework be intentionally introduced and integrated in ways that complement and broaden the experiences, learning, and growth of LGBTQ+ youth, who are themselves multi-dimensional individuals who will benefit from a broader, richer base of relationships, opportunities, and supports? How might this broader foundation become a deep resource of strength from which they can also draw for strength and resilience?

Positive youth development, as expressed in developmental assets and developmental relationships, **provides a vision and an opportunity to continue advancing the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth** with youth themselves as active partners. As with any framework, it is only a "frame," waiting for those who will be using it to fill in the specific pictures with their own lives and experiences. At that point, it becomes a dynamic resource that can become transformative for those who invest in it and make it part of how they see the world.

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