

At risk students and the DAP

We are all familiar with what our system terms the “at risk students,” the students that seem to get into trouble no matter how much help they have, no matter how much attention they receive. Many have troubled home lives. Some have problems with drugs and alcohol. Sometimes it is violence that becomes the issue. Whatever it is, many of these students confront us with problems that seem impossible to solve. How can we help show these students their strengths when it almost seems that they have none?

Even if these students’ lives aren’t overflowing with positives, we all know that they do have something and any ‘something’ is enough to build on. Wendy Acosta is a therapist and school counselor near Spokane, WA and she deals with the students that no one else can deal with. “When I get a kid, everybody’s given up on them. I don’t get them till the court says, ‘failed adoption,’ the school says ‘suspension for the rest of the year.’ Then they get to come talk to me.” Despite troubles that these students have and the difficulties in their lives, these young people do have strengths. “I’ll run the DAP,” says Acosta, “and the next day I’ll have to say, ‘oh my goodness! I’m so glad to meet you! I don’t get to meet kids like you very often. Let me tell you how wonderful you are!’”

The DAP has the awesome potential to show students what is good about them, show them the things that are right with them. In many cases this simple act of showing a student some of the strengths in their lives gives them the motivation to change things. One student of Acosta’s who always got into trouble and had a hard time in school was thrilled when he learned of his strengths. Upon receiving the results of his DAP he approached his principal and said, “I gotta talk to you. I gotta tell you about my strengths. That lady says I have strengths.” With this knowledge the student began to change. Though he had been a self-proclaimed hater of books, he now began reading because he knew it was something good he could do for himself. “I always thought I had to be bad,” he said.” No one ever told me I could be good.”

One small residential school in the Northeast serves children from low-income backgrounds with limited resources and social need. The school “nurtures and educates children in social and financial need to lead fulfilling and productive lives” says the school website. Last year the school started using the DAP with some of their transitional housing students. “We’re working on building assets for non-traditional students,” said a senior researcher at the school. “This year all of our seniors are in our transitional living program. We’re using information from the DAP to inform this program.” The intent is to use this strength-based information to help students better adjust to life on their own after high school. “I know it sounds like an odd place to start,” said the researcher of piloting the DAP with the transitional housing students. But of all the places to start, why not begin with those young people that are labeled “lacking” or “deprived” or “at risk”? These are some of the students that can most benefit from knowing their strengths. These are the young people that, in one way or another, have probably been told all their lives that they aren’t good at anything. These are the students that will benefit from knowing their strengths.

The DAP is a tool that shows great promise to help any kid turn their life around. It is all too common for kids that come from troubled families or deprived backgrounds that they're no good, that they aren't smart enough or that they will not succeed. The Developmental Assets Profile can show students that this is not the case. "It's such a valuable tool to give kids another picture of themselves," says Acosta. And it's not coming from something that someone else is doing for them. "They're doing something positive, and they're doing it themselves."

Wendy Acosta can be reached by phone at (509) 599-1514 or by email at wacosta@msn.com