



December Asset of the Month: FAMILY SUPPORT

Family provides high levels of love and support.

This document is designed to help adults throughout Silicon Valley develop materials and activities to promote the asset of “Family Support.”

Newsletter Content

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The Importance of Family Support

Family support refers to the ways that parents, siblings, and extended family show love, encouragement, and comfort to each other—families are the cornerstone of the social support system for youth. A 2004 survey of Santa Clara County youth reveals that while younger youth generally experience and are aware of family support, teenagers do so much less often: 89% of 4th-6th graders reported family support, while only 66% of middle- and high school students reported the asset.

Because adolescents require greater autonomy and independence than younger children, effective family support for older youth takes a different form than in earlier years; however, their need for their families is still strong. Adults are challenged to find a balance between giving youth the support they need to navigate their adolescence and the independence they need to develop as individuals.

In their book *Parenting Teens with Love and Logic*, Foster Cline, M.D. and Jim Fay discuss the transition from parenting younger children—who typically require guidance and firm limits—to parenting adolescents, who benefit most from the freedom to make their own decisions within the boundaries of safe, reasonable limits. According to Cline and Fay, effective parenting in the teenage years requires clearly communicating expectations and consequences while allowing youth to make their own decisions and “own” the results...even if their choices are not the ones that we would have preferred.

The following discussion topics can be used to open a dialogue with young people about the ways that they experience family support:

- Does your family provide support in a way that’s meaningful and easy for you to recognize? Why or why not?
- Do you and your parents treat each other with the same kindness and dignity that you’d expect from your friends?
- Does your family do things together on a regular basis? Are there any activities that you’d like to share (or be willing to share) with your family?

One of the most important things to realize about providing family support to older children is that they need the love and support every bit as much as younger children do, even if they claim that they don’t. Although it can be challenging to remain connected to preteens and teenagers, the benefits of doing so are immense.

This article was provided courtesy of Project Cornerstone’s Asset-a-Month program. For more information, visit www.projectcornerstone.org.

Activities

The activities below offer a starting point to help build and strengthen the asset of family support.

For families...

- Make family rules together, and agree on rewards for following the rules and consequences for breaking them.
- Try to eat at least one meal together every day, and set aside at least one evening or weekend day for the family to spend together in a pastime that everyone enjoys or finds valuable. Make the effort to maintain these traditions and rituals even if your children complain about them when they're older.
- Be sure to recognize your children's unique talents and encourage their interests, even when they don't match yours. For example, if they're interested in animation, check to see if there's a convention or film festival in your region that you can attend together.
- Look your children in the eyes when you talk to them, and give them all of your attention in conversation.
- Be empathetic about their struggles and concerns—no matter how silly or trivial their problems seem to you, they are significant to your children.
- Praise your children for doing a good job and point out when they're being helpful.
- At least once a day, try to express that you appreciate and care about your children.
- Be affectionate, but respect their space; older children especially may be uncomfortable about displays of affection in front of non-family members.

For all adults...

- Talk with young people about their families and point out the ways that the children are supported and loved. Similarly, when you speak with parents, take time to notice and praise their efforts at providing family support for their children.
- If you're an employer, help your staff provide emotional support for their families through release time, sick leave, and creating a positive environment where employees don't feel that having children is a liability at their job.
- Sponsor activities and events in which the entire family can participate—for example, a picnic or carnival instead of a happy hour.

In schools and youth programs...

- Deliver a unit on families to help young people appreciate and respect all kinds of families.
- Schedule events that bring families together, like open houses or family game nights.
- If possible, schedule speakers and workshops on family life and associated issues.
- Be sure that your staff recognition and acknowledgement of non-traditional families in which a child's primary caretakers may not be their biological parents.

Resources

- Project Cornerstone's Taking Asset Building Personally is a six-week workshop for adults that focuses on ways that parents and all adults can be more effective and intentional in building assets in young people's lives. For information on scheduling Taking Asset Building Personally at your site, contact Project Cornerstone at (408) 351-6482.
- "Family camps" are a great way for families to spend time together in a relaxing outdoor environment. Check with your city, YMCA, or faith community to see when family camps are offered.
- Some good books about providing meaningful support to older children include *Parenting Preteens with a Purpose: Navigating the Middle Years* by Kate Thomsen, M.S., C.A.S.; *Why Do They Act That Way?* by David Walsh, Ph.D.; *How to Talk So Teens Will Listen & Listen So Teens Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish; and *Parenting at the Speed of Teens*, published by Search Institute.

About the Asset-a-Month Program

The Asset-a-Month program is an initiative of the Project Cornerstone public policy team, which contains representatives from local governments, agencies, and youth-serving organizations. The goals of the Asset-a-Month program are to help align adults throughout our diverse community in their efforts to promote positive youth development by fostering developmental assets. For more information about the Asset-a-Month program, contact Anne Ehresman, Project Cornerstone's executive director, at (408) 351-6424 or Anne@projectcornerstone.org.