

# A path to a hopeful future adequacy vs. thriving

Jay Hutchins interviews  
Peter Benson of Search Institute.

Search Institute is an independent nonprofit organization with a mission to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities. At the heart of the institute's work is the framework of 40 developmental assets. These assets are positive experiences and personal qualities that many development researchers believe young people need to grow up to be healthy, caring, and responsible. The challenge for Peter Benson, president of Search Institute and one of the founders of the positive youth development movement, is: How do we know that a young person is moving toward a hopeful future?

Peter Benson believes that the social sciences know a lot more about the negative pathways in adolescent development than the positive. The overuse of negative indicators tends to demonize youth, leading to the public's withdrawal from their lives. In the following interview, Peter explains why he believes we must provide communities with a more balanced view of adolescents and their capabilities.

*Cynthia King-Guffey - Guest Forum Editor*

**Sockeye:** One of your main issues is the way social scientists evaluate the development of children and youth. Please explain the idea of thriving that you are attempting to introduce.

**PB:** Here's the idea: How do we help young people flower into the kinds of persons who don't simply avoid problems and pathologies, but who embrace life and make full use of their unique gifts? This idea of thriving emphasizes a person's developmental path more than their current location on particular so-called "indicators." It relates both to current well-being, all the current positives in a young person's life, and even more so to an upward developmental trajectory.

**Sockeye:** How is this different from current models?

**PB:** We have adopted a conventional medical model in caring for young people. Unless they are "sick," we don't treat them. The concept of positive development views the experience from childhood to adulthood as a progression of events that dynamically interact with each other simultaneously.

A focus on optimal development should begin with seeing each life as precious and filled with potential. It recognizes that all citizens have responsibility and capacity to nurture this potential. It calls for schools and communities to know each of its young so well that it can nurture and benefit from each child's spark. It recognizes that governmental policy requires deep transformation, moving from a preoccupation with preventing problems to a proactive investment in promoting human potential.

The concept of thriving is, in the jargon of developmental psychology, an under-utilized construct. I believe measures of development should represent a dynamic interplay between a young person's personal agency and his or her environment over time. I am describing a young person intrinsically energized by discovering his or her specialness, and developmental contexts such as people and places that

affirm, celebrate, encourage, and guide this journey. This is also called self-efficacy.

Sockeye: You mention, in one of your papers that the issues important to young people are not about changing them but about changing community—actually changing society.

PB: I think we need to transform every level of our communities to better address the issues confronting childhood development. Not just the family life, but our broader society and the policies that shape economics including schools, congregations, and other places where young people spend time.

So this focus on what we call thriving is a call towards enriched environments in which our young people can be given the opportunity to flourish. Also, it is important to make sure our youth are major actors in their own development. They are significant and underutilized

resources for creating the kinds of relationships, contexts, ecologies, and communities that facilitate their own development.

Sockeye: What advances do you believe are needed both in the worlds of research and practice?

PB: Well, let's start with research. We are taking on a significant challenge when trying to define, assess, and measure thriving in young people. It is much easier to collect data on the number of kids who smoke, or the dropout statistics in our high schools. Most studies do not seem to agree on the assets that might contribute to thriving: What is a thriving indicator? And, is thriving a status, a process over time, or both?

Even the vast amount of research that has been done on resilience can be viewed as being primarily about how people attain adequate functioning in the face of serious developmental

threats, not how they overcome those challenges to thrive. The resiliency research does not tend to set the bar high enough. We need a holistic, developmental, strengths-based approach to evaluate our youth and the contexts in which they are growing.

I see the need to integrate the research on positive development into a coherent set of indicators to promote consensus around the meaning of “thriving.” Something we could use to measure the thriving of adolescents like we use the APGAR test for newborns.

We need a new set of metrics that helps us know if our young people are moving forward to put their unique strengths into play—for their own good and the good of society.

Sockeye: The reading I have been doing on this is pretty complex, not that specific, and difficult for a layperson to sort through. There is a lot of

*The first-ever compilation of maps, data and intelligence on the concept of equity planning in the Portland-Vancouver region.*

## THE REGIONAL EQUITY ATLAS

Metropolitan Portland's Geography of Opportunity

- Featuring over fifty maps, The Regional Equity Atlas examines the geographic distribution of people and assets in the region.
- Learn how your neighborhood compares to others in access to affordable housing, quality public schools, transit, public parks, greenspaces, grocery stores and more.
- The Regional Equity Atlas helps us begin to grapple with how to distribute the burdens and benefits of growth more fairly.



Check out this unique resource  
and order your copy at:  
[www.equityatlas.org](http://www.equityatlas.org)



Coalition for a  
Livable Future



Portland State  
UNIVERSITY

“development is not linear nor an orderly progression through universal stages, but a dynamic process that varies widely for different individuals.”



vocabulary such as “domain specific status” and “global developmental process.”

PB: That is true. There are issues like the fact that there is little explicit agreement about whether thriving is a domain-specific or more global construct. A clearly domain-specific status indicator is school success. More global developmental processes are overcoming adversity or valuing diversity.

Sockeye: I have just been reading about Walter Mischel, the behavioral cognitive psychologists, who found very little consistency in people’s behaviors across different circumstances. If he is right, this must make finding thriving indicators quite complicated.

PB: That is right. One of the challenges of identifying global indicators is that they do not reflect virtues like wisdom, courage, and temperance, which might vary depending on context or circumstance. This means a young person might be wise in dealing with friends, and not nearly so wise in dealing with teachers. He or she might show courage in articulating an unpopular opinion in a class discussion, but be afraid to take a last-second shot that would win or lose a basketball game, and so on.

Sockeye: So, in order to look at positive indicators rather than just risk factors do you have to accommodate culture?

PB: I believe we do. Positive value judgments about what is desirable tend to reflect a particular moral and cultural framework. This framework is less universal than most people’s perception of risky behavior and so positive values are harder to come up with than negative ones.

For example, the view that youth involvement in violence or cigarette smoking is plainly harmful to them and can kill them, does not depend very much on one’s cultural background or moral orientation. But showing leadership ability or being individually successful may not be highly valued within a moral orientation that values self-effacement and group harmony more.

Sockeye: From a practical point of view, where should we start?

PB: Well, I think we should increase the percentage of the federal budget we spend on children and youth. We should increase the average starting salary for school teachers and for youth workers.

We should increase the percentage of children who have access to daycare and afterschool programs. We need to

send a message to politicians that they need to be more pro-child. The child’s share of federal domestic budget in the United States fell by 23 percent from 1960 to 2006.

In 2000, the federal government spent \$2,106 per child and \$21,122 per adult over the age of 65. Add to this the fact that 78 million baby boomers are moving into retirement in the next 20 year and this group is educated, active, and mobilized as a voting block. They will place a high demand on budget decisions. Children could be in for an even a smaller percentage of the whole when we should actually be reversing it.

At the root of our dilemma is the lack of vision. We simply do not have a frame of reference, a shared understanding, a common dream, for growing great kids. We create, at best, national and community initiatives designed to put out fires.

Sockeye: At the end of one of your papers, you mention the religious, civic, and moral commitment in developing countries toward solving social problems. It is clear that you are discussing and have been studying what a lot of people would call the spiritual aspects of young people’s attitudes about themselves and their peers.



PB: That is true. In the paper you mention I looked at studies indicating that less than 1 percent of thousands of studies on children and adolescents in the social sciences addressed spirituality. A parallel gap is evident in religious studies which have a tendency to marginalize explorations of children and childhood events, even though theologians for centuries have addressed children and their nurture as important.

The Higher Education Research Institute recently released major research on the spiritual lives and interests of about 112,000 freshmen from a national sample of over 230 colleges and universities. About 75,000 students say they believe that “we are spiritual beings.” Four out of five had an interest in spirituality and believed to some degree in the sacredness of life. Almost half reported an interest in seeking opportunities to develop themselves spiritually.

[The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education. HERI is housed in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies (GSE&IS) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).]

Sockeye: I have often thought that spirituality and the many faith-based

beliefs that affect our social lives are so prevalent that they actually may be related to an evolutionary adaptation. Is there a spiritual component to biological-cognitive development issues?

PB: Yes there is. Integrating spiritual development more fully into a foundational understanding of child and adolescent development is growing. The John Templeton Foundation has launched a multi-continental effort to build a broad consensus around the core dimension of spiritual development. At Search are thrilled to be leading such a project. The core hypothesis is that every person develops spiritually just as every person develops cognitively, emotionally, or socially. And like other areas of development, some young people’s spiritual development is vibrant and enriching, while for others it is not.

Sockeye: What do you mean by ‘some do not experience spiritual development as vibrant or enriching?’

PB: Development is not linear nor an orderly progression through universal stages, but a dynamic process that varies widely for different individuals. Within the positive youth development literature and the ideas I am expressing, there is a specific critique that mainstream psychology has distorted our view of how

a person develops. Moral perspectives, and even religious views, are not seen as developmental resources because they tend to fly in the face of secular social-science traditions.

Sockeye: In what context do you put positive indicators or positive status outcomes and this idea of human spirituality?

PB: These are important benchmarks along with reducing negative outcomes for measuring how well a nation is raising its young are important. But perhaps the more critical issue is how a life of hope and generosity and engagement evolves or develops across time. Put somewhat differently, what are the signs in early, mid, and late adolescence that a young person is moving toward, or is on a pathway to, a hopeful future in young adulthood and beyond? I believe we can make a reasonable distinction between adequacy and thriving and include a natural spiritual component to this outlook.



*For a balanced and enlightening description of the John Templeton Foundation google NPR and John Templeton Foundation. - Jay Hutchins*