# Introduction

It may sound cliché, but…children and adolescents are so important to the future success and health of our world. They will be the parents, teachers, physicians, psychologists, policy makers, and world leaders of tomorrow. The future well-being of families and communities depends on the healthy psychological development of youth. Unfortunately, exposure to environmental stressors and biological, genetic factors can place youth at greater risk of developing behaviors that are destructive to themselves, their families, and their community. These youth are *not* beyond help.

Over the past three decades, I have been working with at-risk children, adolescents, and their families in a variety of settings, including schools, outpatient youth service agencies, an inpatient hospital, and residential and correctional programs. My past jobs have included direct care staff, tutor, therapist, school psychological consultant, psychologist, and clinical director. Through these experiences, I have had many opportunities to observe, participate, and learn about what works and does not work with children and youth. The use of a strengths-based approach is without question the most effective tool I have found for providing services that truly have a positive impact. The purpose of this book is to provide information about the many strengths-based concepts and interventions that can be employed in mental health and educational settings that serve youth and their families.

## Defining a Strengths-Based Approach

A strengths-based approach (SBA) focuses on the identification, creation, and reinforcement of strengths and resources within individuals, their families, and their communities. It is an approach that focuses attention on what is right with youth rather than what is wrong with them.

## Defining At-Risk Youth

The term *at-risk youth* is used throughout this book and describes children and adolescents who have been exposed to various types of environmental stressors (i.e., prenatal and perinatal problems; physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; neglect; chronic poverty;

loss due to death or abandonment; parental substance abuse or psychopathology) and/or have biological, genetic risk factors (i.e., family history of psychological disorders) that place them at higher risk of negative life outcomes. At-risk youth often struggle with behaviors that are destructive to themselves and others. These behaviors include truancy, running away, noncompliance toward authority figures, physical/sexual aggression, theft, destruction of property, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors, eating disorders, social withdrawal, depressed or dysregulated mood, and excessive fears and anxieties. The term *at-risk youth* also includes youth who are currently functioning well but are at increased risk of developing problems in the future. Although the term is an accurate description for the youth described in this book, it is also accurate to classify these youth as *at-promise.* They all have the capacity to develop into healthy, well-adjusted adults.

## Organization of the Book

This book consists of 14 chapters, subdivided into two main sections, and a conclusion. Part 1, "Overview of a Strengths-Based Approach" contains the first seven chapters, which provide an overview and highlight the benefits of a strengths-based approach. Chapter 1, "Strengths-Based Approach: What, When, How, Where, Why?" provides information about what a strengths-based approach is, when and how it has evolved, where it is being utilized, and why it is important for working effectively with at-risk youth. Chapter 2, "Evidence-Based Support," describes a wide array of empirically supported strengths-based concepts and interventions. Chapter 3, "Thinking Back to Childhood Experiences" focuses on the importance of providers' remembering what it is like to be a kid when working with youth. Chapter 4, "Holistic Perspective: Prevention, Assessment, and Intervention," highlights the importance of viewing at-risk youth as much more than their problems and directing services toward prevention, assessment, and intervention that encompass strengths and resources that impact healthy development. Chapter 5, "Promoting Resiliency in Youth," offers information about protective factors commonly associated with resiliency that can enhance a youth's capacity to overcome adversity and develop into a prosocial adult. Chapter 6, "Motivating and Engaging Youth," provides information about human motivation and how to engage youth in educational and mental health services. Chapter 7, "Enhancing Youths' Openness and Honesty" provides information regarding the when and how of effectively addressing youths' problem behaviors and personal struggles.

Part 2 of the book, "Strengths-Based Interventions" includes chapters 8 through 14. Chapter 8,"Strengths-Based Interventions: An Overview" provides an introduction to the strengths-based interventions, which are broken down into six categories. Chapters 9 through 14 elaborate on each of the six categories. Chapter 9, "Relationship Development," highlights strategies for forming positive relationships with youth and their families. Chapter 10, "Optimistic Attitude Development," discusses interventions

that promote hope within youth, caregivers, and providers. Chapter 11, "Asset Development," highlights several interventions that emphasize youth assets/strengths. Chapter 12, "Prosocial Development," provides specific information for helping youth develop prosocial skills. Chapter 13, "Intellectual Development," focuses on strengthening intellectual development as it relates to learning and acquisition of skills, as well as on the promotion of multiple intelligences, including emotional intelligence. Chapter 14, "Provider Development," offers information about the healthy professional and personal development of teachers, mental health professionals, and other youth service providers.

The book's conclusion, "Final Thoughts About a Strengths-Based Approach," offers summary remarks about SBA and its importance within youth services.

## Intended Audience

The target audience for this book is youth service providers from many disciplines who work with youth and families. The term *provider* is used to describe mental health therapists, teachers, psychologists, psychiatrists, direct care residential staff, caseworkers, probation and parole officers, judges, attorneys, police officers, and anybody else who works with youth. The term *provider* is also intended to represent the many courageous caregivers who provide love and support to at-risk youth on a daily basis. Much of the book's content is relevant for caregivers.

This book is also intended for those who will soon be providers in the youth service field. This includes undergraduate and graduate level students who are pursuing careers in counseling/clinical psychology, social work, education, sociology, criminal justice, marriage and family, school psychology, and other human service professions.

## Goals of the Book

### Goal 1: To enhance interest in and knowledge about a strengths-based approach

The strengths-based approach is the underlying foundation for all the interventions described throughout the book. It is hoped that the content will assist youth service providers in better understanding and implementing a strengths-based approach in treatment and educational settings.

### Goal 2: To promote hope and optimism about at-risk youth

Much of the developmental and neurological research, statistics, and case examples described in this book highlight the incredible capacity youth possess to develop into prosocial adults. The content will remind providers about the many reasons to remain hopeful about at-risk youth.

*Goal 3: To provide a toolbox of strengths-based interventions*

Although having a theoretical understanding of a strengths-based approach is important, the primary purpose of this book is to provide a multitude of specific, concrete interventions that providers can utilize in their day-to-day work with youth. Clinical case examples, treatment metaphors, and life examples are described throughout the book to illustrate strengths-based interventions.

*Goal 4: To energize providers about the valuable work they do every day*

Working with at-risk youth can be emotionally taxing. Exposure to issues of abuse, trauma, depression, anxiety, and various types of disruptive behaviors can increase a provider's risk of becoming pessimistic and overly focused on problems and deficits. This is a recipe not only for ineffective services but also for occupational burnout. The content of this book highlights how vital youth service providers are to the healthy development of youth and how important it is to maintain an optimistic, strengths-based perspective.

> *In order to ensure the anonymity and protect the privacy of the resilient youth and families described in this book, names and other identifying information have been modified.*