

Human Development is Fundamental to Thriving

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Theories in human development have driven our research at *Roots of Action* for more than a decade. The [Compass Advantage framework](#) is a simple and engaging lens to understand core aspects of human thriving. Through this lens, individuals and organizations can learn to strengthen abilities that have been shown to nurture human development from childhood through older age.

Our research began with a focus on adolescent development. We wanted to know how adults nurtured the development of young people in ways that fostered their engagement as responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizens. We soon learned the abilities that propelled youth to become purposeful citizens were the same ones that fostered human development at all ages. While *Roots of Action* shares articles and resources that bolster positive youth development (PYD) from kindergarten through high school, it is important to understand that the long-term goal of PYD is to promote healthy development throughout a lifetime.

What is Human Development? Why is it Important?

Human development centers on strengthening the attributes and abilities that help people flourish in life. According to the [United Nations](#), it "is about giving people more freedom to live lives they value. This means developing people's abilities and giving them a chance to use them."

For young people, human development involves nurturing abilities that help them decide what matters most in life and encouraging them to determine and navigate their own paths. It is about facilitating meaning and purpose, rather than using grades and test scores as the sole measurement of self-worth. For adults, human development involves fostering abilities that give people the opportunity to live lives they value rather than using income as the sole measurement of success or wellbeing.

Human development is an important area of study. Multidisciplinary research shows that people can improve their lives and wellbeing at any age by enhancing their human abilities through positive relationships, experiences, and opportunities. In addition, the Human Development Index (HDI) is a tool for assessing a country's development by the [health and wellbeing of its citizens](#), not by economic growth alone.

Erik Erikson (1950) developed a theory that outlined [eight stages](#) of human development, from infancy through old age. Yet regardless of age or stage, there are core underlying abilities that are linked to human thriving throughout the lifespan. Development that begins during childhood is interconnected with adolescence and adulthood. That is why our current research using the self-administered [Compass Survey of Core Human Attributes](#) spans the ages from five through older age.

This article provides detailed background on the research in human development that was used to create the *Compass Advantage* framework and the compass surveys. It is most helpful for those interested in using our work within schools, nonprofits, and organizations; and for researchers who wish to understand the concepts behind our work.

A Framework for Understanding Human Development



The compass framework supports the concept of human development as envisioned by the [United Nations](#). It also supports diverse educational frameworks, including Social Emotional Learning (SEL), developed by the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) (Dusenbury et al., 2015); the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model, developed by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#); and the Framework for 21st Century Learning, developed by [Battelle for Kids](#).

Beyond educational equity, the compass framework focuses on achieving [developmental equity](#)—the right of all children to have the relationships, experiences, and opportunities that help them thrive in school and life.

One of the premises of research in the field of positive youth development is that strengthening personal abilities, attributes, competencies, and civic values in young people promotes human development throughout the lifespan (Benson et al., 2007).

Researchers in youth and adult development have identified a variety of human attributes that enable individuals to positively contribute to self and society. Since Peterson & Seligman (2004) classified twenty-six character traits and six virtues associated with human development and thriving, thousands of studies have shown how internal abilities contribute to agency and wellbeing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The Compass Advantage framework is grounded in [systems theory](#). Our research explored the patterns within broad categories of abilities practiced regularly by exemplar youth. We discovered that young people who became agents of social change regularly demonstrated and practiced eight core abilities—curiosity, sociability, resilience, self-awareness, integrity, resourcefulness, creativity, and empathy—by the time they reach the end of high school (Price-Mitchell, 2010b, 2015). These teachable abilities are key components of social and emotional learning (SEL) and used to foster developmental and academic competencies in preschool through high school-aged students (Dusenbury et al., 2015).

These eight abilities have been widely studied as individual constructs by other researchers and found to be important for youth, adult, and societal thriving. Our research suggests there is a systemic connection between the eight abilities, meaning they work together toward the attainment of wellbeing. Below is an introduction to the research on each ability, how that ability contributes to self and societal wellbeing, and what we measure, based on research, in the [Compass Survey of Core Human Attributes](#).

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to recognize, feel, and respond to the needs and suffering of others. A complex human attribute, scientists agree there are affective and cognitive aspects to empathy (Davis, 1983; Deutsch & Madle, 1975) and that empathy is related to prosocial behavior and altruism (Batson, 2010; de Waal, 2008; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Hoffman, 2008). It has been shown that empathy is foundational to a person's ability to care for others (Slote, 2001, 2004).

Research in human development and social neuroscience suggests empathy benefits individuals by fostering positive interpersonal relationships (Batson et al., 2015; Cozolino, 2006; Decety & Svetlova, 2012). It has also been shown to facilitate greater cooperation and less conflict within social groups (Cikara & Van Bavel, 2014) and to benefit society through altruistic, caring actions (Batson et al., 2015).

The compass surveys measure a person's motivation to care for the wellbeing of others by assessing one's intent to behave in caring, prosocial ways (Decety, 2015). This more narrow, cognitive measure of empathy is supported by the literature and helped us focus on empathy's outcome rather than the underlying psychological complexities of empathy. The survey's focus

on caring actions is also supported by the behaviors we observed in civically engaged youth (Price-Mitchell, 2010a).

Curiosity

Curiosity is the ability to seek and acquire new knowledge, skills, and ways of understanding the world. It is at the heart of what motivates kids to learn, provides a key pathway to student success, and keeps young people learning throughout their lives. Curiosity facilitates engagement, critical thinking, and reasoning. Multidisciplinary researchers have studied curiosity as a mental state (Inan, 2012), an emotion (Brady, 2009; Silvia, 2008b) and an intellectual or moral virtue (Baehr, 2011; Baumgarten, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Most contemporary scientists view curiosity as a basic element of cognition, a motivator of individual learning and decision making, and a vital force to human development and wellbeing (Kang et al., 2009; Kidd & Hayden, 2015; Park et al., 2004; von Stumm et al., 2011). Curiosity not only benefits individuals but is also linked to positive societal outcomes, including tolerance of uncertainty, positive emotions, humor, out-of-box thinking, creative innovation, and positive social action (Celik et al., 2016; Clark & Seider, 2017; Kashdan et al., 2013).

The compass surveys assess behaviors and attitudes that have been linked to aspects of curiosity that Kashdan et al. (2020) defines as *joyous exploration* and *stress tolerance*. The pleasurable experience of finding the world intriguing has been linked to a love of learning and a fascination with acquiring new knowledge and abilities (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009; Park et al., 2004; Schutte & Malouff, 2020). Curious people must also believe they can cope with high levels of challenge, complexity, and uncertainty (Silvia, 2008a). These aspects of curiosity mirrored the information-seeking behaviors of purpose-driven young people (Price-Mitchell, 2015).

Sociability

Sociability is the joyful, cooperative ability to engage with others. It is derived from a collection of social-emotional skills that help students understand and express feelings and behaviors in ways that facilitate positive relationships, including active listening, self-regulation, and effective communication (Dusenbury et al., 2015; Mahoney et al., 2020).

The ability to engage in positive relationships is linked to human development and thriving, including increased resilience, health, and wellbeing (Luthar, 2015; Noble & McGrath, 2012). In youth, social competencies and friendship networks are predictive of academic achievement (Asher & Paquette, 2003). Sociability is related to prosocial behavior and civic involvement (Foschi & Lauriola, 2014) and improves societal wellbeing (Adler & Seligman, 2016).

The compass surveys use two sub-scales to assess sociability. The Interpersonal Behaviors Subscale examines individual practices that are shown to enhance social relationships in multiple contexts, including the ability to listen, communicate clearly, negotiate conflict (Dusenbury et al., 2015), and cooperate with others (Argyle, 2013). Based on Porges's (2001) polyvagal theory of social engagement, the Self-Control Subscale assesses an individual's practice of regulating

emotions in ways that promote positive social interactions, including managing negative emotions, anger, and defensiveness, despite disagreements and conflicts (Cozolino, 2006).

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to meet and overcome challenges in ways that maintain or promote wellbeing. Historically, the study of resilience has been the purview of human development researchers who have worked on identifying protective factors that promote resilience in children, particularly in at-risk populations (Luthar, 2015). Some theorists link resilience to aspects of personality like hardiness and *ego resilience*, a trait that reflects general sturdiness of character (Eisenberg et al., 2004). Resilience in adulthood has been studied far less than in childhood but a growing body of research links resilience to attributes like grit, persistence, initiative, determination and positive adaptation throughout the life span (Ong et al., 2009; Snyder & Lopez, 2002).

Developmental researchers have mainly studied resilience in individuals. But resilience has also been shown to be integral to all social systems, including schools (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007), families (Patterson, 2002), organizations (Duchek & Raetze, 2017), and society (Walker, 2019).

The compass surveys assess behaviors and feelings recognized in the literature as representative of individuals who demonstrate psychological resiliency. Resilient people express feelings of hope, optimism, and faith about their futures (Ong et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2000); convey positive emotions during difficult times (Cohn et al., 2009; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Ong et al., 2009); value social connectedness and find meaning when life is challenging (Ryff, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 2003).

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to examine and understand who we are relative to the world around us. It is developed through skills like self-reflection, meaning making, and the process of honing core values and beliefs. It is an essential aspect of human development (Ardelt & Grunwald, 2018).

A benefit to individuals, self-awareness has been linked to greater emotional intelligence (Serrat, 2017); an ability to make meaning from life experiences (Gardner et al., 2005); self-efficacy (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016); and the development of mindfulness, self-compassion and gratitude (McGehee et al., 2017). The societal benefits of self-awareness are also great, including the ability to understand other's worldviews, co-create new relationships between diverse groups (Yan & Wong, 2005), and become an effective organizational and societal leader (Gardner et al., 2005).

The compass surveys assess the private and public behaviors and beliefs that have been recognized as representative of individuals who demonstrate self-awareness. In addition to the above references, self-aware people understand their strengths and weaknesses, reflect on their life experiences, and can identify connections between their emotions, words, and actions

(Serrat, 2017). They also work hard to understand their values (Gardner et al., 2005) and life purpose (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016).

Integrity

Integrity is the ability to act in ways consistent with the values, beliefs, and moral principles we claim to hold. Rooted in centuries of moral philosophy and ethics, integrity is derived from the Latin word *integritas*, meaning wholeness. Carl Rogers (1961) first described *psychological integrity* as a time when a person's feelings "are available to him, available to his awareness, and he is able to live these feelings, be them, and is able to communicate them if appropriate" (p. 61). Integrity has been classified as a character strength and virtue and linked to moral courage, honesty, responsibility, authenticity, and trustworthiness (2004).

Integrity has inherent value to individuals and society. In contemporary literature, it has been shown to include both moral and psychological aspects of self that help individuals integrate values and actions across the lifespan (Cottingham, 2010; Cox et al., 2003). It has also been associated with self-actualization and positive interpersonal outcomes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For society, integrity has been shown to have a strong positive relationship to transformative leadership (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002).

The compass surveys assess three types of behaviors that have been recognized by researchers as representative of individuals who demonstrate integrity. These behaviors include displaying consistency of words and actions, even during adversity (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007; Simons, 2002); being true to oneself; and showing moral/ethical behaviors, like honesty and moral courage (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Resourcefulness

Resourcefulness is the ability to find and use available resources to achieve goals, problem-solve, and shape the future. The literature on resourcefulness focuses on a common theme—the processes by which humans achieve goals. Rosenbaum's theory of *learned resourcefulness* suggests that a repertoire of mastery behaviors that include planning, problem-solving, and evaluation help individuals attain higher levels of achievement (1990, 2000). Psychologist Carol Dweck suggests that an individual's beliefs about intelligence guide their goal-setting and corresponding performance. She described this belief as a *growth mindset* (Dweck, 1999, 2006).

The benefits of human resourcefulness are many. It has been associated with adaptation to new and challenging situations and linked to more positive health outcomes (Zauszniewski & Bekhet, 2011). Resourcefulness helps students mitigate academic stress and depression (Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2003). For society, resourcefulness is key to achieving social innovation through the capacity of communities to engage in collaborative goal-setting and problem solving (Ulug & Horlings, 2019). It is also at the heart of entrepreneurship (Misra & Kumar, 2000).

Similar to Kennett & Keefer's (2006) integrated approach to evaluating resourcefulness, the compass surveys draw from both Rosenbaum's and Dweck's work. It assesses four types of

behavior and/or beliefs of resourceful people, that high achieving individuals monitor and evaluate their actions; employ problem-solving strategies; exhibit self-control (Rosenbaum, 1990); and possess a growth mindset (Dweck, 1999, 2006).

Creativity

Creativity is an everyday human capacity to produce new ideas, discoveries, and processes. It has been studied from multidisciplinary perspectives, including cognitive psychology (Ward et al., 1999); motivation (Collins & Amabile, 1999); personality (Feist, 2010; King et al., 1996), and systems theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The focus of *everyday creativity* is on the diverse ways people engage in activities that use their creative minds to improve themselves and society (Conner et al., 2018; Cotter et al., 2018).

Creativity has been linked to human flourishing for its ability to connect individuals with life's meaning, a theme that underscores much of human inquiry (Wright & Pascoe, 2015). People who engage their creative abilities tend to respond more effectively to change, becoming more adaptable, flexible, and responsive to life circumstances (Bruner, 1993). As a foundation for art, science, and technology, creative imagination is the basis of every creative action (Lindqvist, 2003). For society, creativity and innovation are vital to solving multidisciplinary global problems (Ahlstrom, 2010).

The compass surveys assess behaviors related to everyday creativity, including one's self-efficacy for generating new and innovative ways of doing things (Karwowski & Beghetto, 2019); ability to appreciate artistic expression by others (Wright & Pascoe, 2015); and views about one's creative abilities (Putwain et al., 2012).

Human Development in Standards-Based Education

The Compass Advantage framework and the [Compass Survey for Youth Ages 10-17](#) can be easily integrated into a standards-based curriculum to bolster the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students are expected to possess at critical points in their education.

The framework supports Social/Emotional Learning Standards, including those developed by the [Illinois State Board of Education](#). Their three SEL goals include:

- Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.
- Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.
- Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

With its focus on positive youth development and social-emotional learning, the compass framework also supports the mission of many kinds of schools, including the [International Baccalaureate \(IB\) Learner Profile](#).

Learn how to use the [compass surveys in the classroom](#) and how to spark conversations about inner strengths.

Role of Psychological Wellbeing in Human Development

At the turn of the century, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) predicted that “a psychology of positive human functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities” (p. 13). Since then, there has been growing interest in the psychology of positive human development, including the study of attributes, strengths, and virtues that contribute to human thriving and wellbeing,

Psychological wellbeing generally refers to a “combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships and accomplishment” (Seligman, 2011, p. 25). Researchers examining human *thriving* across the lifespan often conceptualize the term as a growth-oriented, developmental process (See, e.g., Benson & C. Scales, 2009; Bundick et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2003). Su et al. (2014) defines seven core dimensions of psychological wellbeing, the first being *subjective wellbeing* in the form of high life satisfaction and positive feelings. Subjective wellbeing is known to be an internal barometer of how other aspects of psychological wellbeing are currently satisfied.

A core aspect of our research at *Roots of Action* involves studying the association between subjective wellbeing and the practice of curiosity, sociability, resilience, self-awareness, integrity, resourcefulness, creativity, and empathy in youth and adulthood.

Our research in human development and how it is linked to thriving is ongoing. Preliminary data suggests that when young people and adults practice the eight compass abilities in their daily lives, they report higher subjective wellbeing.

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