



# WORDS MATTER:

*Amplifying the Message*

THROUGH AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH



[suwn.org](http://suwn.org)



You're invited!

Join us as we shift to an asset-based approach to communicating about Step Up.

We are shifting from communication that calls out what needs to be fixed to language that spotlights the existing good we can build on together.

# WHAT DO WE MEAN?

We don't want to focus on what might (or might not!) be lacking in our teens' lives (a deficit-based approach) because an over-focus on what is absent makes it too easy to miss seeing and capitalizing on the good that is there. And we know there is lots of good!

Step Up's entire approach to working with teens is based on the belief that each girl has untapped potential and deserves to develop it to the fullest. We design programming to unmask and build upon each teen's individual potential. We don't assume there are needs, that the needs are all the same, or that we know how to meet them for every individual girl.

Step Up knows every teen girl we meet is a unique individual with incredible potential, and we partner with each teen to help her know and max out her potential.

This is who we are and what we do, and we want our language to convey it. And we want Step Up girls to focus on their assets, too!

## OLD DEFICIT-BASED

Step Up addresses girls' barriers to success.

Step Up seeks to reduce dropout rates and end the dropout crises.

Step Up teens are often facing difficult family situations like violence, abuse, unemployment or illness.

Summer internships are essential for crime prevention.

We need to find more summer internships for at-risk girls.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmZ2tijiV9c>

## NEW ASSET-BASED

In Step Up, girls set goals.

In Step Up, teens sharpen their problem solving skills.

Step Up works with girls to prepare for graduation.

Step Up teens are graduating high school on time.

In Step Up, girls work with each other and their mentors to think about and plan for life after high school.

Step Up teens support each other in graduating from high school on time and ready for the next step.

At Step Up, girls find the time, space and attention they need to realize their goal of graduating high school on time.

Step Up seeks to increase graduation rates.

Step Up teens are aspirational and taking action to graduate high school confident, college-bound, career-focused, and ready to join the next generation of professional women.

Through the Young Luminaries summer internship program, girls have an opportunity to contribute to the community.

Girls from our community are seeking summer internships.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAJ3BKzVReM>

# WHY ARE WE MAKING THIS SHIFT?

Because our girls are at the center of what we do. They hear, read and see how Step Up talks.

**An emphasis on risk or deficits communicates a sense of failure and helplessness and often results in the following outcomes:**

- Labeling, which may lead teens to lower their expectations of themselves
- Obscuring the recognition of each girl's unique capabilities and strengths
- Focusing on the "can'ts" as opposed to the "cans"
- Prescribing "fixes" and "interventions" instead of the space, time, attention, exposure, and opportunity for girls to create their own visions and paths
- Looking for patterns, such as broken homes, dysfunctional neighborhoods, and poverty, to explain away the problems of teens from under-resourced communities versus recognizing that all teens face and must learn to deal with adversity without letting it define them or limit their ambitions for themselves

**Conversely, an emphasis on assets:**

- encourages a growth mindset
- reinforces resilient behaviors
- communicates a sense of hope
- establishes expectations for success within a girl's capacities
- promotes empowerment and independence
- sets in motion forces for improvement



## SO WHAT'S NEXT?

You'll see Step Up shifting the way we talk about our work in our emails, social media, on our website, during mentor training, in videos and more.

We've already begun this shift, and additional communications will be updated over the coming year.

Step Up looks forward to working with you on this asset-based approach to communicating our work. Because, WORDS MATTER!

Additional information on this communications shift appears in our appendix.



# APPENDIX

## OUR PURPOSE

Step Up believes ALL girls should have the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

## OUR MISSION

Step Up is a nonprofit membership organization propelling girls from under-resourced communities to fulfill their potential by empowering them to become confident, college-bound, career-focused, and ready to join the next generation of professional women.

## OUR VISION

Step Up teen girls will graduate high school confident, committed to realizing their full potential, able to persevere through college and career transitions, willing to claim their value, and prepared to be agents in the creation of a more inclusive and robust professional landscape and a more just and prosperous society.

## OUR STRATEGIC PLAN

Step Up is executing on a strategic plan focused on scaling our impact, with the goal of reaching 12,000 girls by 2020.

## OUR 8 CORE VALUES

**Take Pride in Involvement** It means something to be affiliated with Step Up. We'll do everything we can to make sure you feel that special something through your involvement, too.

**Be Inspired By and For Each Other** At Step Up, we're here for each other. Through your involvement, you are inspiring others to support our work too - sometimes, without even realizing it.

**Take the Long View** What we do today, can truly impact tomorrow. We're keeping that in mind.

**Celebrate Success** Carve out time to acknowledge achievement. It's time well spent.

**Innovate** The way it's always been done has already been done. Find a new way.

**Take Action** Do something! Something has to happen for something to happen.

**Trust Teamwork** Teamwork doesn't mean everyone helps with everything. It means we know our teammates are so good at what they do, we can leave their role to them.

**Amplify Our Message** We so strongly believe that all girls should have the opportunity to fulfill their potential, we'll shout it from the rooftop whenever we can.

# APPENDIX

## CONTINUED

### STEP UP BELIEVES

1. Teens benefit when they have access to extended time in structured, adult-supported activities.
2. Teens, families, schools and communities benefit when schools become a hub for non-school enrichment and support services.
3. All teen girls should feel part of a community of aspirational women who are working together to build exciting futures and having fun doing it.
4. When teens feel supported by a wide array of adults, they are more likely to set higher educational goals, complete more years of schooling, express strengths such as self-discipline and resilience, and engage in activities that are beneficial to their physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development and well-being.
5. It is easier to be what we can see; therefore, teens should be exposed to all types of people, colleges, professions, and places to work.
6. Stimulating the flow of social capital between and within communities leads to a more equitable, civil and just society.
7. Intellectual and emotional growth are possible and desirable for all people, in all places, at all times in their lives.
8. Good teen programming takes a positive approach to youth development and builds on the many strengths of adolescence.
9. Social and emotional skills allow teens to fully benefit from their education and position them for success in their professional and personal lives.
10. Opportunities to play, explore possible identities, and take stock of fears and insecurities help teens discover what drives them, to accept and love themselves, and to feel confident about their decisions and actions.
11. Teens are more likely to develop confidence when they have access to safe and brave spaces.
12. Personal background and culture help shape the knowledge that learners create.
13. A very important marker of our success is the extent to which teens take what they learn in Step Up and use it outside of Step Up.



# APPENDIX

## CONTINUED

### A SHIFT IN THE WORDS WE CHOOSE

Typically, human service agencies focus on individual, family, neighborhood, and community needs/deficits/problems.

When we emphasize risk factors and over-rely on deficit-based language when talking about the teens and communities with whom we work, we become at-risk for making mistakes in our work that run counter to our mission and values.

### ASSET-BASED VS. DEFICIT-BASED APPROACHES

Youth development theory (and therefore, Step Up!) emphasizes the value of “asset-based” rather than “deficit-based” language.

The language used should focus on positive outcomes and personal strengths, rather than problems and barriers. Language is powerful and can have a direct impact on participant experiences and program success.

Some basics of an asset-based approach:

- Focus on the assets and strengths that girls bring to the program and not on “deficits” or “prevention” issues.
- Avoid explicitly or implicitly labeling youth as “at risk” through program names, program materials or other messaging.
- Avoid language that is unfairly critical of the local

community (i.e, defining the community in terms of gangs, crime, unemployment, etc.)

- Through language and programming, affirm the positive role of parents and communities in supporting local youth
- Through language and programming, affirm the positive role of local employers in supporting local youth.
- Seek to focus messages and programming on skill development, contributions to the community, and the academic and personal achievements of youth.

### A MENTOR'S FOCUS: BUILDING ON THE GOOD THAT IS ALREADY PRESENT

The media frequently tells us about the various problems youth face – juvenile crime, experimenting with substances, academic problems, gang involvement – the list goes on. It is easy for adults to focus on trying to solve these problems rather than focus on the positives.

A strength-based or asset-based approach takes us from conversations that are centered on fixing what is wrong to conversations that are more hopeful and focused on building on the good that is already present. In many cases, problems are resolved as a person builds on their strengths.

# APPENDIX

## CONTINUED

In mentoring, an assets-based approach starts with getting to know your mentee. Make time for conversations to learn about her gifts, talents, interests and resources.

Mentors can help girls discover their strengths and build on them. Compliments help reinforce the positive and can contribute to increased confidence.

### **Step Up mentors are trained to:**

- Use a flexible, youth-centered style that emphasizes teens' interests and preferences
- Act as sounding boards and models for effective communication
- Facilitate identity development by opening doors to resources and opportunities on which teens can draw to construct their sense of identity and helping teens envision possible selves

The phrase “girls living or going to school in under-resourced communities,” which appears in our mission statement and elsewhere, will remain. Here, Step Up is describing aspects about our society that impact the girls, rather than labeling or generalizing our girls and their families.

### **“PEOPLE FIRST” LANGUAGE FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Language should focus on the person first before anything else, including any disability or medical condition. Using “People First” language, one says “a student who has a disability,” focusing on the person first, rather than using labels like “disabled student,” “the disabled,” “handicapped” or “SPED student.”

People First language also avoids negative words that suggest tragedy, such as “afflicted with,” “suffers from,” or “victim of.” It also avoids using a disability or condition to define what a person “is.” A person simply “has” a disability or medical condition.

People First language focuses on support and accessibility rather than on disability. For example, instead of “she cannot use a pencil” it is more helpful to say that “she writes with a computer.” Instead of “she is non-verbal” it is more useful to say “she uses a communication device.” Instead of “she can’t walk” it is more useful to say “she uses a power wheelchair.”

People First language suggests avoiding euphemisms (such as “differently-abled” or “physically challenged”).



# APPENDIX

## CONTINUED


It also reminds us there are many occasions where it is not necessary to refer to a disability at all. Unless a conversation is focused on medical or educational needs, accommodations or supports needed in employment, or other topics related to a disability, it is not necessary to identify the person through their disability.

### **WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO MARKETING AND MESSAGING FOR STEP UP?**

Step Up works with students with disabilities alongside students who do not have disabilities. We use “People First” language in order to communicate effectively with students, staff and the community.

The concept of “People First” language provides insight that may be applied to the overall marketing and messaging strategies of Step Up. Key concepts are that “language is powerful” and that simple changes in language can shape a more positive message.

Some common threads between People First language and asset-based language are:

- Avoid labeling individuals (such as “at risk”)
  - Also avoid substitutes for labels, since these are quickly recognized as labels
  - Avoid program names that subtly or not-so-subtly label participants
  - Develop language that focuses on the person rather than the program
  - Focus on assets rather than problems or deficits
- 

# APPENDIX

## CONTINUED

### EXAMPLE MENTORSHIP CONVERSATIONS

#### Instead of... (yes/no questions that assume)

#### Step Up suggests... (open-ended questions that affirm)

Did you like that?

Why do you feel this is important?  
What do you hope for?  
What would you want to share?

Do you know how to complete this?

What are some things you have experienced that are similar to this?  
What did you do?  
How can you use some of what you've learned in similar situations to get this done?

Have you been doing your homework?

How would you describe your success?  
Describe what you have learned.  
What's going well at school these days?

Don't you think it would be better if you did this first?

How might we approach this?

Do you think that plan will work?

What has worked?  
How would you describe the path to the future?  
If you could make one change, what would it be?  
What do you see as your role in the future?  
Imagine a successful point in the future. What does it look like?  
What part would you want to play in the future?



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Words Matter guide includes information from the following resources, which Step Up gratefully acknowledges:

Skillpages.com

Michigan State University

Mental Health For Kids

Peace Corps

For more information on Step Up, please visit [suwn.org](http://suwn.org) or email [national@suwn.org](mailto:national@suwn.org).

