

Strength-Based Assessment: Applications and Development of the Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales, Parent Version

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Natalie Endrulat, Kara Tom, & Kenneth W. Merrell

University of Oregon

Strength-based assessment provides information that has been lacking in traditional deficit-based approaches to evaluation by assessing positive strengths and characteristics associated with resilience. This is especially relevant in light of subjective well-being and psychopathology making unique contributions to predictions of children's functioning (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001; Suldo & Schaffer, 2008). Moreover, a positive approach to assessment aims to not only reduce symptoms of mental health problems, but also to promote well-being (Beaver, 2008).

Rooted in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), strength-based assessment focuses on strengths and assets and aims to prevent problems by emphasizing mental health. Rather than only identifying symptoms and deficits associated with diagnoses, strength-based assessment targets a child's overall well-being by addressing emotional and behavioral skills that include competencies such as creating a sense of personal accomplishment, experiencing satisfying relationships, and enhancing one's ability to deal with adversity and stress (Epstein & Sharma, 1998). The focus of strength-based assessment on students' skills, knowledge, and competence, and the link between assessment and intervention, are also aligned with best practices in assessment and population-based approaches to school mental health services (Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg, & Furlong, 2004).

Currently, few comprehensive, empirical, strength-based assessment measures are available to practitioners. The Social-Emotional Assets and Resiliency Scales (SEARS; Merrell, 2008) was designed as a multi-rater assessment system that provides information on student social and emotional skills, knowledge and competence. The SEARS is a strength-based, multi-source, multi-informant assessment measure with clear applications for individual assessment, as well as universal social-emotional screening and progress monitoring (Merrell, 2008).

The Social-Emotional Assets and Resiliency Scales

The SEARS (Merrell, 2008) is a newly developed cross-informant social-emotional assessment system, currently being researched and refined. As its name implies, the SEARS is a strength-based assessment system, aimed at assessing positive social-emotional attributes of children and adolescents, including social and emotional knowledge and competence, peer acceptance and relationships, resilience in the face of difficulties, coping skills, problem-solving abilities, empathy, global self-concept, and other positive traits.

The intended age range for the SEARS assessments is grades K-12, or about ages 5-18. Four rating forms comprise the system: a student self-report for children in grades 3-6 (SEARS-C), a student self-report for students in grades 7-12, a teacher report for teachers of students in grades K-12 (SEARS-T), and a parent report for caregivers of children ages 5-18 (SEARS-P). The various forms contain similar items, reworded slightly to reflect

appropriate age levels or setting contexts. The current research versions of the SEARS assessments range from 52 to 54 items, and require an average of about 15 minutes to complete. Items are rated using a four-point categorical rating scale, where the rater is asked to determine whether a particular item is "never," "sometimes," "often," or "always" true for the student who is being rated.

Method

Scale Development

The items in the Social Emotional Assets and Resiliency Scale - Parent (SEARS - P) were generated from a comprehensive review of literature and existing assessment tools to develop a large pool of descriptors of positive social and emotional characteristics, consistent with the theoretical foundation of the SEARS process. A total of 97 items were initially generated through this process. These 97 potential items were then organized into 12 clusters of common assets: friendship skills, empathy, interpersonal skills, social support, problem-solving, emotional competence, social maturity, global self-concept, self-management, social independence, cognitive strategies, and social-emotional resilience. The item sample was reduced to 51 items to balance content coverage and avoid duplication of items. A content validation panel consisting of six psychologists reviewed these items for feedback on wording and appropriateness of items. Wording on items was modified and items were deleted or reorganized as a result of this process, to make them specific for the SEARS-P.

The rating instructions for the SEARS-P were developed based on a categorical, four point rating system, where respondents are asked to determine how often a particular characteristic is true for the child or adolescent being rated (Never, Sometimes, Often, Always/almost always), with corresponding raw score values ranging from 0 – 3. Readability analyses on the SEARS-P form using the Flesh-Kincaid program on Microsoft Word revealed a readability score of 3.6, indicating that items are comprehensible to people with at least average third grade reading skills. The SEARS-P also had a Flesh Reading Ease score of 83%, indicating a high degree of readability for individuals at this level.

Participants

Schools were invited to participate in the SEARS norming project through direct recruitment on the University of Oregon's Strong-Kid's website, and through guest lectures, trainings, and active solicitation by the author and participating graduate students. Informed consent was obtained from participating parents, through a process approved by the Human Subjects IRB at the University of Oregon.

The current national normative sample for the SEARS-P includes ratings of students from schools from Iowa, Massachusetts, Georgia, Colorado, Ohio, and Hawaii. Parents completed the form on children in Kindergarten through 12th

grade. 55.7% of parents completed the K-6 form and 44.3% completed the adolescent (7th -12th grade) version of the SEARS-P. A total of 2,023 parents or other caregivers completed the SEARS-P form, and the majority of responders were biological mothers (63.8%), followed by fathers (23.1%). The sampling of male (51.3%) and female (48.7%) students was about equal.

White/Caucasian students comprised 64.5% of the current sample, followed by Asian and Pacific Islander (16.7%), Multiracial (6.3%), Black/African-American (6.3%), Multiracial (6.3%), Hispanic/ Latino (5.4%), American Indian/Native American (0.2%), other (0.5%). Students with disabilities composed 10.3 % of the sample.

Results

Score Differences between Groups

The Cronbach's alpha analysis for internal consistency reliability on SEARS-P parent responses revealed a high reliability coefficient of .97. This indicates strong internal stability of the SEARS-P assessment and strong stability in how the parents are responding to the items.

We analyzed SEARS-P score differences between groups based upon summative SEARS-P scores. A series of independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to analyze the data using the Welch *t'* to estimate the standard error of the difference between sample means and the Satterthwaite's approximation for the degrees of freedom. We focused the analyses between raters, disability, gender and gender matches between raters and their children.

Biological mothers and biological fathers were not significantly different in their ratings, $t(858) = 0.53, p > .05$. Females were rated higher than males by biological mothers, $t(1274) = 4.60, p < .05$, and biological fathers, $t(458) = 2.04, p < .05$. This trend was also true for all caregivers (e.g., step-parents, grandparents), with females receiving higher ratings than males, $t(2015) = 5.32, p < .05$. Lastly, children with disabilities were rated lower than students without disabilities by their caregiver, $t(242) = 8.81, p < .05$.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper presentation was to introduce the SEARS rating system and present preliminary research data from the SEARS-P. Clearly the current data has inherent limitations, some of which will be addressed within the final versions of the SEARS. For one, the sample needs to be improved in several ways. The final sample will be Table 1.

SEARS-P Group Differences Based Upon Independent *t*-tests

	Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i> -score
Gender of child	Female	981	108.39(23.92)		
	Male	1036	102.58(25.15)	2015	5.32**
Educational service	General Education	1805	107.29(23.72)		
	Special Education	207	89.80(27.38)	242	8.81**
Rater	Biological Mother	1279	106.08(24.82)		
	Biological Father	464	105.39(23.63)	858	0.53
Biological	Female	627	109.28(23.62)		

representative of the most recent U.S. census data. In addition, the distribution of scores across grades is currently skewed towards 5th, 6th, and 7th grade. Although our current analyses show some interesting results, these analyses are based on preliminary data, and therefore, may change as the SEARS-P is refined into its final version.

Upon completion, the SEARS rating system will provide school psychologists and other evaluators with an assessment tool to gather valuable information about students' social and emotional strengths and assets. To reach the point where practitioners can access and integrate this strength-based measure into their assessments, current research efforts are focused on completing the development on the SEARS rating system. Future analyses will involve factor analyses, examination of construct validity, determining cutoff points and a scoring system. In addition, test-retest and convergent and discriminate validity studies are being conducted at the University of Oregon. Lastly, the SEARS rating system will provide a measure of social and emotional strengths and assets of children and adolescents to explore important research questions related to children's well-being and resilience.

References

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Copies of the SEARS may be viewed at: <http://strongkids.uoregon.edu/~SEARS.htm>. This website also contains additional information on the SEARS norming and standardization project.

mom ratings & child gender	Male	651	102.95(25.58)	1274	4.60**
Biological dad ratings child gender	Female	220	107.72(23.26)		
	Male	243	103.26(23.84)	458	2.04*
Grade level	K-6	1128	104.73(25.16)		
	7-12	894	106.29(24.10)	1950	1.42

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

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