

## ***ASSESSING POSITIVE YOUTH CHARACTERISTICS: DEVELOPMENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE SEARS-P***

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*Abstract:* The purpose of this presentation is to introduce and describe the development of the SEARS-P (parent version). In addition, we present preliminary research data and analyses of national standardization norms to date. Current normative data, descriptive statistics, explorations of parent agreement/disagreement on ratings of the same child, and differences in SEARS-P scores based on gender and educational services are presented.

The Social-Emotional Assets and Resiliency Scales (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 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 research versions of the SEARS assessments range from 52 to 54 items, and require an average of about 15 minutes to complete.

Strength-based assessment practices have evolved from the field of positive psychology, which focuses on human strengths and virtues as well as the prevention of problems (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The SEARS is an empirically validated strength-based assessment measures well suited for assessment and research

within the field of positive psychology and related areas such as social and emotional learning.

Strength-based assessment measures, such as the SEARS, provide parents and educators information on student skills, knowledge and competence that can be used not only for the purpose of assessment, but to address and monitor interventions. While traditional deficit-based assessment approaches allow school psychologists to identify disabilities, these methods do not take into account ecological variables or inform intervention planning by identifying strengths and current skills (Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg & Furlong, 2004). Strength-based assessment is consistent with best practices in school psychology, including linking assessment to intervention and mental health promotion through the development of population-based approaches to providing mental health services within schools. In addition to identifying knowledge and skills associated with resilience and positive outcomes of an individual, the SEARS could serve as a tool for progress monitoring and universal social-emotional screening.

### **Method**

#### **Phase I: Content Selection**

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.

## **Phase 2: Normative Sample**

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 in Iowa, Massachusetts, Georgia, Colorado, Ohio, and Hawaii. A total of 1347

parents or other caregivers completed the SEARS-P form, and the majority of responders were biological mothers (60.4%), followed by biological fathers (25.5%).

Parents completed the form on children ranging in age from 4 to 18 years with majority of parent ratings on 12 year-olds (20.6%), 11 year-olds (16.5%), and 13 year-olds (14.1%). Student grade level ranged from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade with middle school students comprising the largest percentage of the sample: 6<sup>th</sup> grade (21%), 7<sup>th</sup> grade (19.5%), and 8<sup>th</sup> grade (11.3%).

There were about equal sampling of male (50.2%) and female (49.3%) students. White/Caucasian students comprised 77.2% of the current sample, followed by Asian and Pacific Islander (14.8%), Multiracial (3%), Hispanic/Latino (2%), and Black/African-American (1.6%). Students with disabilities composed 10.5% of the sample and of these students, 34.3% were eligible under the category of specific learning disabilities, followed closely by other health impairment (33.6%), speech or language disorder (14.3%), autism spectrum disorder (7.7%), traumatic brain injury (4.3%), and emotional disturbance (2.1%).

## **Results**

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. 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 parents are responding to the items. Preliminary results are reported in Table 1.

## **Future Directions**

The results presented in this handout are based on preliminary SEARS-P data, which although promising, are incomplete. Once data collection for a representative national standardization sample has been collected, future test development

will include identifying clinically relevant factor structures, developing standardization norms, and further explorations of rater agreement/disagreement. The aim is to develop a multi-rater strength-based assessment system that is readily available to practitioners and researchers.

## References

Jimerson, S. R., Sharkey, J. D., Nyborg, V. & Furlong, M. J. (2004). Strength-based assessment and school psychology: A summary

and synthesis. *The California School Psychologist*, 9, 9-19.

Merrell, K. W. (2008). *Social-emotional assets and resiliency scales (SEARS)*. Eugene, OR: School Psychology Program, College of Education. Available at <http://strongkids.uoregon.edu/SEARS.html>

Seligman, M.E.P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction [Special Issue]. *American Psychologist*, 55(1)

**Table 1**

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

|   | Group             | <i>n</i> | <i>M(SD)</i>  | <i>df</i> | <i>t-score</i> |       |        |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------------|-----------|----------------|-------|--------|
| Gender of child                               | Female            | 663      | 108.70(23.21) | 1334.48   | 4.25**         |       |        |
|   | Male              | 676      | 103.12(24.72) |           |                |       |        |
| Educational service                           | Special Education | 141      | 90.13(24.31)  | 172.08    | - 8.21**       |       |        |
|   | General Education | 1198     | 107.83(23.44) |           |                |       |        |
| Rater   | Biological Mother | 814      | 106.07(24.26) | 659.58    | - 0.12         |       |        |
|   | Biological Father | 342      | 106.26(23.49) |           |                |       |        |
|   | Biological Mother | 814      | 106.08(24.26) |           |                |       |        |
|   | Step Mother       | 4        | 66.25(13.81)  |           |                | 3.09  | 5.72** |
|   | Biological Father | 342      | 106.26(23.49) |           |                |       |        |
|   | Step Father       | 13       | 95.62(26.26)  |           |                | 12.74 | 1.44   |
| Biological mother ratings and gender of child | Female            | 404      | 109.06(22.76) | 800.45    | 3.60**         |       |        |
|   | Male              | 406      | 102.97(25.31) |           |                |       |        |
| Biological father ratings and gender of child | Female            | 167      | 108.80(23.23) | 338.78    | 1.97*          |       |        |
|   | Male              | 174      | 103.80(23.60) |           |                |       |        |
| Grade level                                   | K-6               | 831      | 104.56(24.39) | 1116.00   | -2.68**        |       |        |
|   | 7-12              | 514      | 108.15(23.55) |           |                |       |        |

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

**Copies of the SEARS may be viewed at:**

<http://strongkids.uoregon.edu/SEARS.html>

**This website also contains additional information on the SEARS norming and national standardization project**

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