

Moving Beyond *Relationships Matter*: An Overview of One Organization's Work in Progress

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Abstract

Several recent and important reviews of the research on the science of learning and development extensively discuss the power of developmental relationships, but do not provide readers with information or insight on how to build those relationships. The author describes the effort that Search Institute has underway to fill the gap in both research and practice to identify steps that youth-serving organizations can take to create close connections that help young people be and become their best selves.

Key words: developmental relationships; science of learning and development; Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development; Promise of Adolescence; Search Institute

Two years ago, I spoke at a conference in Denver that brought together staff from a diverse group of organizations that were working with young people across the community. I began by asking the assembled teachers, counselors, youth workers, and out-of-school time program staff to raise a hand if they had ever been told by a supervisor that a key part of their jobs was to build good relationships with young people. Pretty much every hand in the room went up. Then I asked the practitioners to raise a hand if their supervisors had ever explained what constitutes a good relationship or had ever started a conversation about that subject. Far fewer hands went up.

Finally, I asked the audience how many of their supervisors had ever provided them with practical supports for building good relationships, such as high-quality professional development, data on how young people in their organizations experience relationships, and

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youth activities and other tools that help them build great relationships. Only a few hands went up.

I thought back to that day in Denver as I read several recent reports that synthesize large bodies of research on youth development. Although each of the reports had a lot to say about why schools, programs, and society should invest in relationships, they had far less to say about what those practitioners in Denver really wanted and needed to hear: how to build developmental relationships that help young people be and become their best selves.

For example, in 2017 the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development released *The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development*. In 2018 the same group released its final report, *From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope*. Both documents emphasize the vital roles relationships play in young peoples' social, emotional, and academic development. They stress putting in place structures and practices that enable every student to be known well by at least one adult, such as morning meetings, teams of teachers that share a cohort of students, mentorship programs, and advisory groups.

But while the Aspen Institute reports underscore the power of relationships and highlight the need for structures that support them, they do not address what adults can and should *do* within those structures to bring those relationships to life.

Similarly, in 2019, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine released *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth*, a book-length document that captures the conclusions of several committees of leading scholars. The study authors succinctly summarized research that has shown that positive relationships help young people mitigate risks, cope with stressful events, avoid behavior problems, develop positive identities, and work hard and succeed in school. But while the authors briefly reference a number of things that parents can do to build developmental relationships with their children in families (such as being supportive, warm, attuned, and firm), they have little to say about what adults in youth-serving organizations can do to achieve that objective.

Another recent effort to synthesize what we know from research had more to say about what all adults can do to strengthen developmental relationships. In 2017, Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, and Rose released *The Science of Learning and Development: A Synthesis* under the auspices of the American Institutes for Research (AIR). In 2018, the same authors published a

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companion article in *Applied Developmental Science* titled “Drivers of Human Development: How Relationships and Context Shape Learning and Development.” In both documents, Osher and company described not only what parents can do to build developmental relationships in families, but also what early childhood providers, teachers, and other adults in settings outside the home can do.

The authors of the AIR reports deserve credit for the work they have done to broaden our understanding of *when* and *where* developmental relationships occur, but their discussion is largely (though not entirely) limited to listing characteristics of developmental relationships (i.e., that they are warm, attuned, reciprocal, sensitive, consistent, trustworthy, stimulating, culturally responsive, and emotionally close). Naming these characteristics is valuable, but it does not tell a teacher or youth worker how to build a relationship with a young person that is sensitive or stimulating or culturally responsive.

Studying the Steps to Strengthen Relationships

Along with other researchers across the United States and around the world, my colleagues and I at Search Institute are working to help our field move beyond analyzing the influence of developmental relationships to study and share ways to strengthen them. Through our work to date, we have identified four steps that youth-serving organizations can take to help adults build developmental relationships. Those steps in our emerging process are summarized below, as are several of the tools that help people take those steps within and beyond their organizations.

Step 1: Reconnect With Relationships

Practitioners from a wide array of youth-serving organizations regularly tell us that they entered their professions precisely because they wanted to form close and caring connections with young people. However, they also tell us that priorities and pressures in the organizations where they work often relegate building relationships to an endeavor that happens when the “real work” of their organizations is done. For new staff, that work often focuses on mastering the content of the curriculum or the program. For veteran staff, it often means helping their organizations achieve the accountability objectives imposed by policy makers, funders, and others. While those accountability objectives serve a purpose, researchers Li and Julian (2012) have argued persuasively that when they distract or impede practitioners from investing in

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developmental relationships, they deprive young people of access to the “active ingredient” (like fluoride in toothpaste) in youth development.

Given the many pressures that push against investing in relationships in youth-serving organizations, at Search Institute we have found that a good place to begin the process of creating a relationship-rich organization is to help practitioners—and especially leaders—recognize that building developmental relationships *is* the “real work” of youth development.

Toward that end, we often lead staff in organizations we work with through an exercise that reminds them of the role that relationships played in their own development. That exercise is built around the Developmental Relationships (DR) in Your Development Tool (Figure 1), a one-page worksheet that invites participants to reflect on the people who did developmentally beneficial things for and with them when they were growing up.

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Figure 1. Developmental Relationships in Your Development Tool (Search Institute)

For each section below, write the names of up to three people who did these things for and with you.

Who showed you that you mattered to them?

They may have done this by . . .

- Being someone you could trust.
- Really paying attention when you were together.
- Making you feel known and valued.
- Showing you that they enjoyed being with you.
- Praising you for your efforts and achievements.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Who pushed you to keep getting better?

They may have done this by . . .

- Expecting you to live up to your potential.
- Pushing you to go further.
- Helping you learn from mistakes and setbacks.
- Insisting that you take responsibility for your actions.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Who helped you complete tasks and achieve your goals?

They may have done this by . . .

- Guiding you through hard situations and systems.
- Building your confidence to take charge of your life.
- Standing up for you when you needed it.
- Putting in place limits that kept you on track.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Who treated you with respect and gave you a say?

They may have done this by . . .

- Taking you seriously and treating you fairly.
- Involving you in decisions that affected you.
- Working with you to solve problems and reach goals.
- Creating opportunities for you to take action and lead.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Who connected you with people and places that broadened your world?

They may have done this by . . .

- Exposing you to new ideas, experiences, and places.
- Inspiring you to see possibilities for your future.
- Introducing you to other people who helped you grow.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Please choose 1 of the following 2 questions to share with your group:

1. Which person did you list in the largest number of categories?
2. Which person on your list was a bit of a surprise because you had not previously thought about how that person influenced your development?

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After participants in our workshops and other sessions complete the DR in Your Development Tool, we put them into small groups to share information on and stories of the people they listed on their worksheets. The conversations that result from completing the DR in Your Development Tool are almost always positive, productive, and sometimes revelatory. Colleagues who work together every day come to see each other in new ways and, in the process, they make more personal connections to the role relationships play in positive youth development. For some, the tool reignites the relational spark that drew them to working with young people in the first place.

Step 2: Define Developmental Relationships

If you ask adults to describe the type of relationships that young people need in order to grow into thriving adults, most will immediately mention the importance of being caring. In fact, if you Google the phrase “caring adults,” more than 200 million results pop up. Search Institute’s studies of developmental relationships are certainly confirming that caring is critical. However, while we found that caring is necessary, we are also learning that it is not sufficient to make a relationship truly developmental. In addition to *expressing care*, we have identified four other elements that are essential: *challenging growth*, *providing support*, *sharing power*, and *expanding possibilities*. Taken together, those five elements are the pillars of our [Developmental Relationships Framework](#), which is summarized in Figure 2. Within the framework, each of the elements is broken down into a set of specific actions that can be operationalized in practice and analyzed in research.

We are learning that when young people experience developmental relationships that include the five elements in schools, out-of-school time programs, and families, key social–emotional competencies such as motivation and responsible decision making are stronger, and risk behaviors such as using tobacco and alcohol are less common (Pekel et al., 2018). For example, a recent longitudinal study that we conducted with support from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences found that when students experience developmental relationships with their teachers, their academic motivation is significantly higher and, in turn, their grades are significantly better (Scales, Pekel, Sethi, Chamberlain, & Van Boekel, 2019).

Figure 2. The Developmental Relationships Framework (Search Institute, 2018)

The Developmental Relationships Framework

Young people are more likely to grow up successfully when they experience developmental relationships with important people in their lives. Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. Search Institute has identified five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people’s lives.

Elements	Actions	Definitions
<p>1. Express Care</p> <p>Show me that I matter to you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Be dependable Be someone I can trust. · Listen..... Really pay attention when we are together. · Believe in me Make me feel known and valued. · Be warm Show me you enjoy being with me. · Encourage Praise me for my efforts and achievements. 	
<p>2. Challenge Growth</p> <p>Push me to keep getting better.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Expect my best Expect me to live up to my potential. · Stretch Push me to go further. · Hold me accountable . Insist I take responsibility for my actions. · Reflect on failuresHelp me learn from mistakes and setbacks. 	
<p>3. Provide Support</p> <p>Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Navigate..... Guide me through hard situations and systems. · Empower Build my confidence to take charge of my life. · Advocate Stand up for me when I need it. · Set boundaries Put in place limits that keep me on track. 	
<p>4. Share Power</p> <p>Treat me with respect and give me a say.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Respect me Take me seriously and treat me fairly. · Include me Involve me in decisions that affect me. · Collaborate..... Work with me to solve problems and reach goals. · Let me lead Give me chances to take action and lead. 	
<p>5. Expand Possibilities</p> <p>Connect me with people that broaden my world.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Inspire..... Enable me to see possibilities for my future. · Broaden horizons..... Expose me to new ideas and experiences. · Connect Introduce me to people who can help me grow. 	

Note. Relationships are, by definition, bidirectional, with each person giving and receiving. However, for the purpose of clarity, this framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person.

Step 3: Enhance Intentionality

When practitioners first encounter the Developmental Relationships Framework, their initial reaction is often that it provides them with a helpful way to think and talk about something they have been doing (or trying to do) for a long time. Not long after gaining that insight, however, they begin to ask themselves and us: “OK, now how do I do all this?”

There is, of course, no simple or universal answer to that question, but in general we have found that the best next step is for each adult to commit to being more intentional about one of the framework’s five elements in their interactions with young people. To help practitioners find that focus, we ask them to complete a simple worksheet called the Intentionality Tool (Figures 3 & 4). The first side of the worksheet asks them to evaluate the degree to which they pay attention to each of the actions in the Developmental Relationships Framework. After participants compute their total scores on the Intentionality Tool, they reflect upon the elements of relationships about which they are most and least intentional. Based upon the results of their self-assessment, they choose one of the five elements of a developmental relationship to focus on for the month after they complete the worksheet. Participants then use the second side of the Intentionality Tool to plan when and with whom they will take concrete steps to make relationships more developmental.

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Figure 3. Developmental Relationships Intentionality Tool, Side 1 (Search Institute)

How much attention do you give to the actions listed below in your relationships with young people at home or at work? Please answer as honestly as possible.		Almost No Attention (1 pt)	A Little Attention (2 pts)	A Fair Amount of Attention (3 pts)	A Lot of Attention (4 pts)	Almost Constant Attention (5 pts)
Express Care	Showing them that they can trust me.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Giving them individual attention.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Making them feel known and valued.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Element Total (add points):		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Challenge Growth	Setting high expectations for them.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Helping them learn from mistakes & failure.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Holding them accountable for their actions.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Element Total (add points):		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Provide Support	Guiding them through hard situations.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Building their self-confidence.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Standing up for them when they need it.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Element Total (add points):		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Share Power	Taking their ideas & opinions seriously.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Involving them in important decisions.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Letting them take the lead.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Element Total (add points):		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Expand Possibilities	Inspiring them to see future possibilities.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Exposing them to new ideas.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
	Introducing them to new people.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Element Total (add points):		_____	_____	_____	_____	_____


Please write down the DR element that is your greatest opportunity for improvement (i.e., your lowest score) on the worksheet above. 

Figure 4. Developmental Relationships Intentionality Tool, Side 2 (Search Institute)

Identifying When and With Whom You Will Be More Intentional

Now that you identified the element of a developmental relationship that you want to be more intentional about in the months ahead, you need to identify *when* and with *which young people or young person* you will be more intentional. Please answer these questions in the boxes below.

Studies show that the more specific you make your plans to change behavior, the more likely you are to close the gap between intentions and actions. Guided by that insight, try to be as specific as possible in answering the questions below. For example, if you are a teacher, rather than writing in the *When* column below that you want to be more intentional about building relationships “In the classes I teach,” you might write, “In my introductory course for 9th graders” or “in the hallway during passing time” or “while I am leading class discussions.” Similarly, rather than writing in the *With Whom* column below that you want to be more intentional about building relationships with “all of my students,” you might write that you want to be more intentional about building relationships with “young people who seem least engaged in class” or with “my African-American male students” or with “the students whose personal lives I know little or nothing about.”

When	With whom?
At what times or while you are doing what activities are you going to be more intentional about using the DR element you identified above?	With which young people or young person are you going to be more intentional about using the DR element you identified above?
1.	
2.	
3.	

Step 4: Reframe Relationships for the World Beyond Your Walls

The final step I want to highlight here somewhat paradoxically does not focus on what happens within youth-serving organizations, but beyond them. While practitioners almost instinctively grasp the role of relationships in education and youth development, people who do not work with young people—from parents to policy makers to the public—often do not. They do not understand the importance of developmental relationships or the ways that the environments and contexts in which young people spend their time deeply influence the degree to which they experience such relationships. The views that parents, the public, and policy makers have of relationships matter because their attitudes can enhance or impede the ability of organizations and individuals to adopt practices and make changes that ensure all young people experience developmental relationships.

Given the need to reframe relationships for people who do not work in education or youth development, two years ago Search Institute began a partnership with Frameworks Institute to develop communications tools that build public support for relational approaches and interventions. After conducting extended interviews, focus groups, surveys, and experiments that cumulatively engaged more than 6,000 people across the United States, Frameworks Institute produced *Reframing Developmental Relationships*, a report that outlines a set of powerful ideas and practical tools for shaping public thinking about developmental relationships.

One of the most promising resources that our colleagues at Frameworks Institute developed is a new metaphor for describing the role relationships play in youth development. That metaphor describes relationships as the roots of youth development. After testing many options (including characterizing relationships as an active ingredient like fluoride in toothpaste), the Frameworks Institute researchers concluded that describing relationships as roots is effective because roots support and nourish trees and plants as they develop and grow, just as positive relationships nourish young people's development by offering them guidance, encouragement, and new opportunities (O'Neil, Volmert, Pineau, & Levay, 2019). The roots metaphor also seems to work because strong roots create stability through all sorts of weather conditions, just as developmental relationships cultivate children's and young people's ability to accomplish their goals in the face of challenge and adversity.

The Frameworks Institute researchers urge organizations that use the roots metaphor to emphasize the importance of multiple roots in order to help people understand that developmental relationships can be built by many adults in young people's lives, including those

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who interact with young people for relatively brief periods of time during their participation in a class or a program. In addition, the Frameworks Institute researchers urge communicators to explain how environmental factors such as water, soil, and air influence the growth of the roots of relationships. Just as the roots of a tree do not grow strong in soil that is fallow or toxic, developmental relationships do not grow strong in youth-serving organizations that do not cultivate them.

What's Next?

There are, of course, many steps beyond the ones I have mentioned here that a school or an out-of-school time program must take to create a truly relationship-rich culture. Those steps include things that are beyond the scope of this article like providing practitioners with engaging and interactive youth activities they can use to build relationships. Looking ahead, we will assess and improve all of the relationship-building tools we have created (including the ones shared in this article) using rigorous methods that will eventually include experimental and quasi-experimental studies. If the long-term effort to study and strengthen relationships in which my colleagues and I at Search Institute and researchers elsewhere are now engaged is successful, when another set of reports synthesizing the science of learning and youth development is written 10 or 20 years from now, they will have as much to say about how to build developmental relationships as they do about *why*.

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