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# Developmental Relationships: The Roots of Positive Youth Development

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10 Years of Youth Voice, Practitioner Wisdom, and Research Insights

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Our special gratitude to Kent Pekel, Ph.D., former Search Institute CEO and President, who led the organization over much of the last decade of this work. Without his vision and leadership this would not have been possible. We also want to acknowledge the leadership, and contributions to this work of Amy Syvertsen, Ph.D., our previous Sr. Director of Research, and Gene Roehlkepartain, current Senior Scholar. This is an expression of the legacy of work by our staff and partners. While many are cited in this paper, there are many more who contributed to this work during their time at Search Institute and we express our gratitude for their contributions.





## **“A tree is not a forest”**

The ability of a tree to thrive—or even merely survive—is dependent on the interacting conditions within its broader ecosystem (e.g. soil, weather, interconnected root system). As a tree is growing, it is also making a significant contribution to the very ecosystem that it is growing in. This mutual benefit and interdependence of a tree and its ecosystem is a wonderful metaphor for the dynamic and interactive nature of positive youth development.

There is no single characteristic, opportunity, or resource (e.g. condition) that produces thriving for youth. Instead, thriving emerges from a dynamic interaction between the developmental needs and strengths of a young person and the support and opportunities in their relational ecosystem. Like a tree, all young people hold the potential to make a unique and vibrant contribution to their communities when provided with the conditions to thrive.

But, we also know that far too many young people and communities have been exposed to harmful conditions that undermine opportunities for thriving. Intergenerational trauma, racism, and discrimination are a few examples of the toxic conditions that people, particularly people of color, have had to face in their ecosystem. This requires us to identify and actively work to remove these barriers while also cultivating, amplifying, and supporting the strengths that exist within these relational ecosystems.

Trees can also withstand harsh conditions because of the collective strength and stability provided by an interconnected root system and a healthy ecosystem of other trees. Like trees, sustainable growth and thriving for youth requires connectivity to others. Developmental relationships are like the roots of positive youth development that are necessary for youth to grow and thrive. This interconnected root system of relationships provides needed support for young people to discover who they are, what they are capable of, and how they can impact the world around them.

Over the last decade Search Institute has been on a journey for a deeper understanding of how developmental relationships are cultivated with, among, and between young people. Along the way we have learned from amazing young people, expert practitioners, and parents, as well as conducted multiple research studies that build on decades of science on relationships.

**It is at the intersection of youth voice, practitioner wisdom, and research insights that our Developmental Relationships Framework was created.**

In this report, we summarize what we've learned from our last decade of work defining, studying, and strengthening developmental relationships for all youth.





## The origins of developmental relationships at Search Institute

Search Institute launched its work on developmental relationships in 2013. This launch was grounded in more than two decades of work creating, studying, and applying the Developmental Assets® Framework (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011) and a decade of work studying young people’s development of deep personal interests or sparks and their relation to youth thriving (Benson & Scales, 2009; Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011; Scales, Redmond, & Benson, 2022). The studies on developmental assets, sparks, and thriving were foundational for the focus on developmental relationships for several reasons.\*

First, the Developmental Assets® Framework, at its core, was always about how young people’s relationships and opportunities (“external” assets) interacted with their values, skills, and self-perceptions (“internal” assets) to promote positive youth development (risk reduction, thriving, and resilience in the face of adversity). That is, relationships were a central part of Search Institute’s history in applied developmental science.

Second, the work on sparks and thriving led us to understand more fully how key relationships nurtured the expression and development of young people’s deep personal interests, and how this process could promote personal and social identity, purpose, and the flourishing of both young

people and the contexts they inhabit. That is, our focus has always been about how the fusion of relational opportunities and individuals’ intrinsic interests and passions can co-produce both positive youth development and positive adult, community, and societal development.

Finally, inherent in the decades of our applied research efforts toward understanding and building youth developmental assets, sparks, and thriving, was a commitment to equity, the principle that all young people deserved and needed these relationships and opportunities in order to develop positively and contribute beyond themselves.

The developmental relationships framework grew foremost out of our long and comprehensive history of studying and promoting relationships that would help all youth identify and nurture sparks that could benefit themselves and their worlds.

**“Our focus has always been about how the fusion of relational opportunities and individuals’ intrinsic interests and passions can co-produce both positive youth development and positive adult, community, and societal development.”**

*—Peter C. Scales, Ph.D., Search Institute Senior Fellow*

\*see more in Scales, Hsieh, & Benson, 2022

## 10 A 10-Year Journey

It was within that formative context that we built on Li and Julian's (2012) seminal paper on developmental relationships. Li and Julian concretely defined features of developmental relationships, including a strong and lasting emotional attachment, investment from both partners in the relationship, increasing complexity over time in what relational partners do together, and a gradual shifting of power to give the young person more autonomy as they grow.

Our foundational work on developmental assets, sparks, and thriving, and Li and Julian's (2012) seminal paper on developmental relationships were guideposts for our path forward. The 10-year journey has been informed by scholarly literature, applied research, youth and practitioner wisdom, and community partnerships, which we briefly describe here.

We conducted an extensive review of multiple literatures, including general discussions of the power of relationships, as well as literature across multiple theories of development and developmental contexts, including positive youth development, attachment and bonding, resilience, motivation and self-determination, parenting and family relationships, student-teacher relationships, peer relationships, mentoring and other non-parent adult relationships, youth programs, and community and social capital (Pekel et al., 2018; Scales, Boat, & Pekel, 2020; Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Houlberg, 2022).

We conducted numerous quantitative and qualitative studies of developmental relationships that, to date, have involved more than 50,000 youth and young adults, more than 1,000 parents, dozens of youth organization and school leaders, and more than 1,500 teachers and youth

development program workers (Boat et al., 2021; Chamberlain et al., 2020; Pekel, 2019; Pekel et al., 2015; Pekel et al., 2018; Roehlkepartain et al., 2017; Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Houlberg, 2023; Scales et al., 2019; Scales et al. 2020; Scales et al., 2021; Scales, Syvertsen et al., 2023; Search Institute, 2020; 2020a; 2020b; 2023; Sethi & Scales, 2020; Sullivan et al, 2016; Sullivan & Syvertsen, 2018; Syvertsen & Meuwissen, 2015; Syvertsen, Scales et al., 2023; Syvertsen, Sullivan et al., 2023; Syvertsen et al., 2016). We also engaged in a deep partnership over three years with five national youth-serving organizations (Camp Fire; City Year; Communities in Schools in San Antonio; Generation Citizen; and the National Center for Families Learning) to help them put developmental relationships more deeply into practice. Through those partnerships, we co-created the [Rooted in Relationships Model](#) of organizational growth and change in order to help organizations become more relationally-rich places (Search Institute, 2020b). In addition, we commissioned [FrameWorks Institute](#) to help us better understand how experts and the public think about developmental relationships and how to cultivate them, an effort that involved another 7,200 youth, parents, program and policy experts, and adult members of the public in surveys and in-depth interviews (Pineau et al., 2018).

From this far-reaching research and practice effort, we have learned a great deal. These learnings are discussed next, beginning with an overview of the Developmental Relationships Framework.

# The Developmental Relationships Framework

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. Young people are more likely to grow up successfully when they experience developmental relationships with important people in their lives. Search Institute has identified five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people’s lives.

## EXPRESS CARE



*Show me that I matter to you.*

- 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

## CHALLENGE GROWTH



*Push me to keep getting better.*

- 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 failures** – Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks

## PROVIDE SUPPORT



*Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.*

- 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 limits in place that keep me on track

## SHARE POWER



*Treat me with respect and give me a say.*

- 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** – Create opportunities for me to take action and lead

## EXPAND POSSIBILITIES



*Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.*

- Inspire** – Inspire me to see possibilities for my future
- Connect** – Introduce me to people who can help me grow
- Broaden horizons** – Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places

*NOTE: Relationships are, by definition, bidirectional, with each person giving and receiving. So each person in a strong relationship both engages in and experiences each of these actions. However, for the purpose of clarity, this framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person.*

# How developmental relationships work

It is important to point out that developmental relationships are **dynamic, bi-directional, and contextualized**. Additionally, the five elements are **interrelated** and **not meant to be comprehensive**. There are likely many elements and actions at any given time that could describe a developmental relationship. Our framework describes the five elements and actions that emerged as core to meeting the developmental needs of youth and promoting youth thriving. It is not meant to capture the totality of developmental relationships but serve as an action-oriented framework for cultivating critical elements of developmental relationships that promote positive youth development.

Developmental relationships are **dynamic and evolving, reflecting changes and variations in people, timing, and contexts** (Rubin & Chung, 2006). A relationship with an adult leader in a youth development program may be just as developmental for a given young person as one with a teacher in a public school, but the context of one allows and encourages a differing basis of connection and activities than the context of the other. Similarly, the accents among the five elements that are most developmental for a 7-year old boy trying to deal with a squabble among his friends are probably going to be different from what is relationally most helpful for a 16-year-old girl trying to decide which colleges to apply to. And a long-term developmental relationship with a teacher or coach may evolve over time from being focused more on challenging growth and expanding possibilities, to providing support and sharing power, to ultimately “only” expressing care as the young person has long since

grown up and “left” the intensity and frequency of contact of the early days of that relationship. The relationship may still be developmental, still promoting growth, but it has a different shape and features now.

Developmental relationships are about **bi-directional, two-way development**, not simply the socialization or training of young people. In a positive and healthy relationship, parents and children change each other for the better. In the same way, teachers and youth development workers who nurture developmental relationships with their students and program participants learn from and are influenced by those young people, in sometimes profound ways, even as they have an often transformative influence on those students (Benson & Scales, 2009; Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Lerner, Alberts, Anderson, & Dowling, 2006).

How the elements are **expressed varies across different kinds of relationships, cultures, and contexts**. An obvious example is that parents have a wider range of appropriate ways to express care, including physical affection, than do teachers or youth development workers. The ways peers can challenge young people to grow, through implicit or explicit invitations to take risks

**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.



or try something new, also are often different than the ways adults do, which often focus more on helping youth to work harder and achieve more (Vandell, 2000). What constitutes appropriate ways or levels of providing support or sharing power also may look very different to a wealthy, intact Asian American suburban family than it does to a struggling single-parent White mother in Appalachia.

The positive effects of developmental relationships are strongest when examined as a **single construct rather than when using the individual elements** (Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Houltberg, 2022; Scales et al., 2020). As would be expected, the elements of developmental relationships are highly correlated and interrelated as most

young people talk about quality relationships using multiple descriptors that stretch across the framework. However, young people may need different emphases among the five elements at different points in their development, specific elements may be important for differing outcomes, and some elements may be experienced more often than others. For example, among middle and high school students, improvement in all five elements predicted more positive perceptions of school climate, and improvements in all elements except Expand Possibilities predicted academic motivation and perceptions of instructional quality. In contrast, only improvements in Challenge Growth predicted year-end grade-point average (GPA) (Scales et al., 2019).

“...after decades of forming hypothesis, conducting surveys, crafting and rewriting definitions, analyzing data and writing journal articles, Search Institute researchers and practitioners have arrive at a surprisingly simple conclusion: Nothing—nothing—has more impact in the life of a child than positive relationships.”

—Peter L. Benson



# What we know so far about the impact of developmental relationships

Over the last decade, we have consistently found a positive impact of developmental relationships on youth outcomes. Although there have been some differences in the levels of developmental relationships reported by young people across various contexts (e.g. in school or out-of-school time) and demographics of youth (e.g., racial-ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic groups and sex, age, gender identity, and sexual orientation) the positive impact of developmental relationships has remained consistent. The positive link between developmental relationships and positive youth outcomes (see Table 1 for detailed list) have been observed in both cross-sectional studies (reviewed in Roehlkepartain et al., 2017) and longitudinal research that follows the same youth over time (e.g., Scales et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020; Syvertsen et al., 2016). When developmental relationships increase over time, so do positive youth development outcomes (Scales et al., 2019).

The way that developmental relationships contribute to positive youth development can be direct or indirect. For example, we have found that students who experience strong developmental relationships have better GPAs. But this usually is not a direct linkage. More typically, developmental relationships contribute to stronger academic motivation, and it is through motivation that relationships have their effect on students' GPAs (Scales et al., 2019; Sethi & Scales, 2020). We have also found that youth reports of strong developmental relationships are directly related to stronger social-emotional competencies and

stronger experiences of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and a more culturally responsive environment in those settings (Search Institute, 2020, and Search Institute, 2023).



The multiple ways that developmental relationships contribute to positive youth development has been found with non-academic outcomes as well. Looking at a workforce development program for youth and young adults in five countries in Africa (Scales, D'Sa et al., 2022), we found that supportive relationships predicted better economic outcomes, but they did so indirectly. Better relationships with parents, peers, and other adults predicted social-emotional skills (e.g., commitment to learning, positive identity). These in turn were related to higher post-program levels of work readiness skills (e.g., literacy, numeracy, financial literacy, self-employment skills) and to savings and access to credit.

We found a similar indirect path in a U.S. sample of low-income youth of color in six work readiness programs: among these youth, developmental relationships with staff led to their improved self-awareness and appreciation of learning (e.g., that they could learn from their mistakes, had learned more about what they want to do in the future, and about the importance of learning new things). Increased self-awareness and appreciation of learning in turn were the more immediate predictors of improved work readiness as measured by responsible decision making, and relationship and communication skills (Boat, Syvertsen, & Scales, 2021).

**The effects may be direct or indirect, but it is difficult if not impossible to find any positive developmental outcome that isn't shaped by relationships.** In both quantitative and qualitative studies, young people with greater reports of experiencing developmental relationships consistently report higher levels of a variety of positive youth development outcomes. This body of research along with the decades of research from others provides a compelling case for the need for a significant investment in ensuring that all young people have the access and opportunity to have multiple developmental relationships in their lives.

**Table 1: Developmental Relationships and Positive Youth Outcomes**

Academic Outcomes	Social-Emotional Competencies	Other Thriving Indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic motivation</li> <li>• Motivation to learn</li> <li>• Working hard</li> <li>• Sense of belonging at school</li> <li>• Perceptions of instructional quality</li> <li>• Level of interest in classroom content</li> <li>• Student voice</li> <li>• GPA</li> <li>• Critical thinking skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills</li> <li>• Concern for others</li> <li>• Buffering the effects of discrimination on social-emotional learning</li> <li>• Social responsibility, teamwork, communication, and inspiring others</li> <li>• Listening and conversation skills, empathy</li> <li>• Emotion regulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal setting, stretching to reach goals, self-efficacy, and identifying deep interests or sparks</li> <li>• Time management, learning from mistakes, self-confidence, forming opinions, future orientation</li> <li>• Sense of safety and fairness in school</li> <li>• Sense of purpose</li> <li>• Openness to challenge</li> <li>• Planful competence, and transcendent awareness</li> <li>• Leadership, public speaking</li> <li>• Civic engagement</li> </ul>

\*See references for specific citations for each outcome.

When developmental relationships increase over time, so do positive youth development outcomes.

# The importance of developmental relationships across the relational ecosystem

For most young people\* their web of positive developmental relationships starts within their families. Our very first study of developmental relationships focused on parents of children ages 3-13 (Pekel et al., 2015). We found that when parents reported that they created developmental relationships with their children, they also reported their children doing better on a variety of positive outcomes that reflect thriving. We also concluded that the effect of developmental relationships on those outcomes was 10 times greater than the effect of demographics, although low-income parents did say it was harder to establish developmental relationships with their children.

In a study of 633 pairs of parenting adults and adolescents, we also found that Share Power was the most important predictor of contributors to civic engagement such as emotion regulation, perspective taking (empathy), social responsibility, accepting people who are different from oneself, and along with Expand Possibilities, among the strongest predictors of informal helping and volunteering (Syvertsen & Meuwissen, 2015).

In another study, we investigated the effects of youth-parent developmental relationships on 15 psychological and social-emotional outcomes (e.g., hopeful purpose, self-awareness, mastery motivation, emotional competence, and social responsibility) in a sample of 633 matched pairs of adolescents and parents (50% low-income), including 176 pairs who met the criteria for being high-stress families (Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Houlberg, 2023). Youth from high-stress families

who had strong developmental relationships with parents were 5-21 times more likely to report all the positive developmental outcomes than were youth also from high-stress families but who had weaker relationships with parents.

The importance of family in the web of relationships is why we have developed and tested some of our earliest tools, approaches, and activities for enhancing developmental relationships in the setting of families, most prominently with our Keep Connected program, developed over two years with the help of six community partners serving families. Focus groups and post-program retrospective surveys of youth and parent program participants offer initial evidence that the program is perceived to enhance parent-youth relationships, family communication and decision making, and youth responsibility and motivation. It is also seen as a help in creating a supportive community for participating families, some similar and some different in demographics, but all united in wanting to give their children the best they can, whatever the challenges they face (Roehlkepartain, 2019).

Beyond the family, teachers and other school staff are a critical strand of the broader web or root system of developmental relationships that young people need to thrive. That web can and should include adults in other settings as well. In fact, in a study that we conducted in 2019 we found that 70% of youth in out-of-school time programs and 62% of young people who participated in student support programs that work

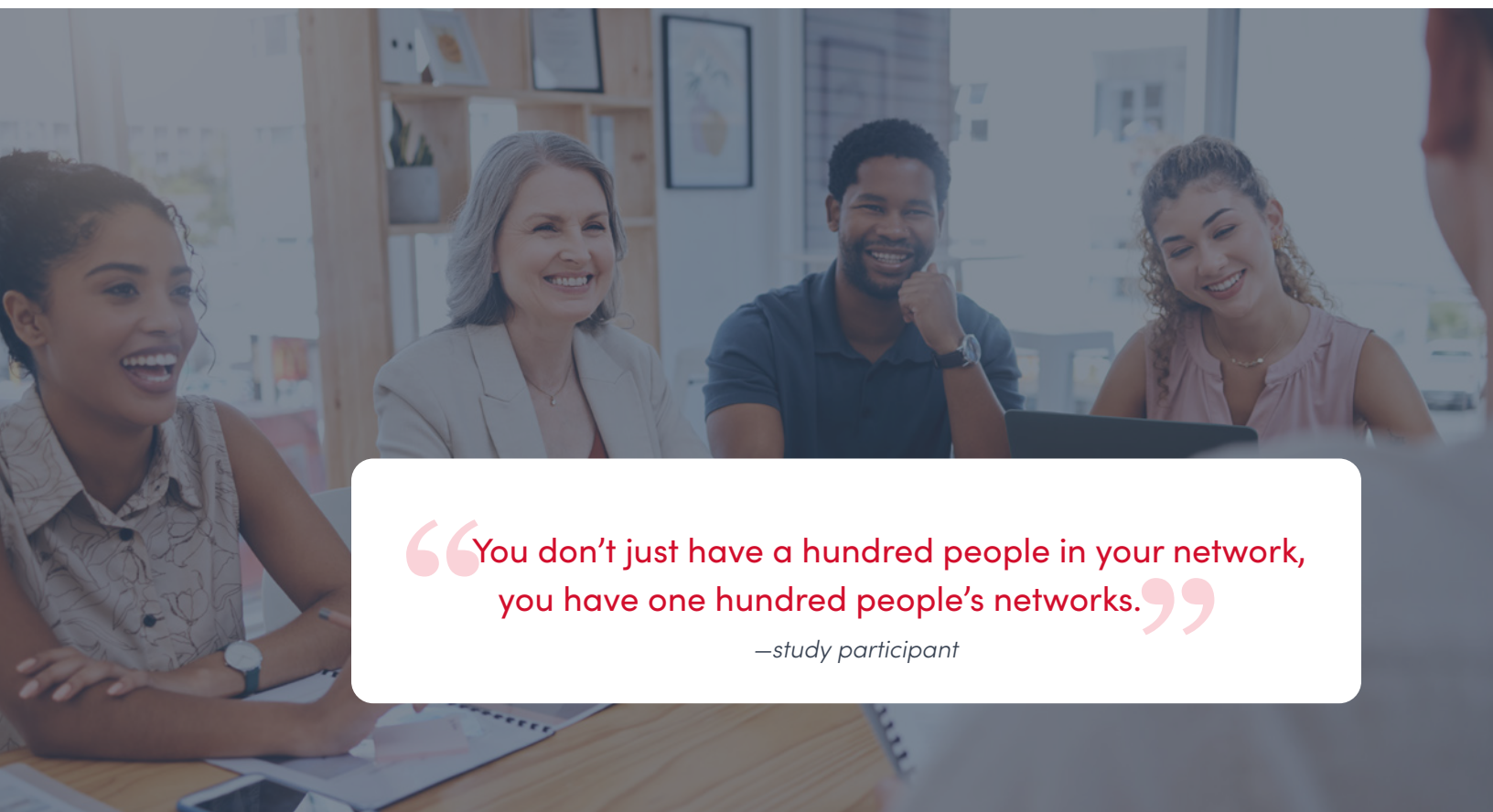
\*who are not abused or neglected by their parents

within schools reported strong levels of developmental relationships with program staff, whereas only 40% of students reported having strong developmental relationships with their teachers (Search Institute, 2020).

That finding underscores the valuable role that a wide array of youth-serving organizations play. A participant in a qualitative study that we conducted of six career pathways programs for low-income youth of color captured this multiplying effect well when she noted that participating in the program means that, “You don’t just have a hundred people in your network, you have one hundred people’s networks” (Boat, Sethi, Eisenberg, & Chamberlain, 2020, p. 24).

What makes youth programs and settings successful is not so much features of programs as it is the qualities of the relationships in those pro-

grams. Features that ensure safety, proper training of the adults, and program experiences that are interesting to young people all are important, of course (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). But what activates all those in the service of positive youth development is how much the five elements that characterize the developmental relationships are present among adults and youth in the program, among youth with other youth, and among the adult staff and volunteers (Li & Julian, 2012; Pekel et al., 2018). For example, a large meta-analysis of 158 studies showed that students’ emotional intelligence strongly predicts grades, regardless of age, in part not just because those students regulate their emotions better, but because they are also better able to build broader networks of differing kinds of strong relationships at school (MacCann et al., 2020).



“You don’t just have a hundred people in your network, you have one hundred people’s networks.”

—study participant



## What gets in the way of cultivating developmental relationships

All young people need and deserve developmental relationships, but not all youth have them. We have found some important differences in how and where youth experience strong developmental relationships. We know that it will be important for us to understand why these differences might exist and work towards finding solutions to ensure that all young people have opportunities to make authentic connections. There is more to discover but we hope this work can propel more targeted ways to improve developmental relationships for young people.

In our research so far, youth in out-of-school-time programs (OST) report significantly stronger developmental relationships than youth in school or student support program settings (Boat et al., 2021b; Search Institute, 2020). Further, in schools, only a minority of students (12%–40% depending on the study) say relationships with teachers get better over the school year (Scales et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020). High school students experience developmental relationships less than middle-school students do (Roehlkepartain et al.,

2019; Scales et al., 2019), which could be related to both context and development. We found additional variation in one of our large studies: African American/Black and Asian/Pacific Islander youth experienced stronger developmental relationships with teachers than youth who identified as Multiracial, White, Native American/Alaskan Native, or as another race (Search Institute, 2020).

Economic constraints also contribute to inequities in the availability and quality of developmental relationships. Young people from lower-income backgrounds (those who are eligible for free or

### What gets in the way:

- lack of resources
- unmet needs
- economic constraints
- life experiences
- racism and discrimination

reduced-priced lunches and/or who feel financially strained) are less likely to report adequate developmental relationships, and, in the school setting, are more likely to report relationships with teachers worsening over the school year (Boat et al., 2021b; Scales et al., 2020; Scales et al., 2021). In addition, parents experiencing financial strain say it is harder for them to have developmental relationships with their children (Pekel et al., 2015).

We also have found youth experience the different elements of developmental relationships at different levels. For example, Expand Possibilities and Share Power are among the least commonly experienced elements of developmental relationships (Pekel et al., 2015; Scales et al., 2019; although some studies have found Express Care also among the least experienced, e.g., Boat et al., 2021b; Roehlkepartain et al., 2019; Search Institute, 2023). Having limited relationships that expand possibilities and share power may especially lessen the social capital that historically marginalized youth of color and from low-income communities can access to create “bridges” to educational and occupational opportunities from which they have been systematically excluded.

Additionally, we have found that youth and adults have very different experiences of developmental relationships. Often adults feel much better about their developmental relational actions towards youth compared to what youth experience. In both schools and OST programs, teachers and staff are 2x more likely to report strong developmental relationships than students say they experience them (Boat et al., 2021b; Search Institute, 2020). Moreover, there are greater disparities in teacher and student reports of developmental relationships at the high school than middle school

## The Rooted in Relationships Model

We use an organic metaphor to describe the dynamic systems that work together to ensure all young people within an organization or program experience the developmental relationships they need to thrive. We chose a ginkgo tree to represent the positive youth outcomes that proliferate in a relationship-rich setting.

The ginkgo tree, which displays bright, yellow leaves in autumn, is extremely resilient. It can thrive in many different conditions, with deep roots that make it resistant to damage from harsh weather.

### Positive Youth Development Outcomes (*tree*)

In this model, the tree represents a healthy and thriving young person. Thriving is indicated by looking at several key areas of development including psychological, social-emotional, academic, and civic.

### Developmental Relationships (*roots*)

Just as a system of roots supports and nourishes trees as they grow, a network of developmental relationships (with family, peers, teachers, coaches, staff) offers youth connection, stability, encouragement, guidance, and opportunities they need to thrive. Research has shown that young people who experience strong developmental relationships are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, such as substance abuse and violence; and are more likely to report a range of positive outcomes, from academic success to social-emotional competencies and prosocial behavior.

### Relational Climate (*soil*)

Roots absorb nourishment from the soil in which they grow. Soil conditions are critical for optimal growth and development of the root system. To cultivate the soil, we add important nutrients, remove toxins, and create space for roots to grow deeper and stronger. Similarly, an organization can cultivate a climate that is intentional, inclusive, and equitable. A relational climate that embodies these characteristics provides fertile ground for strong youth-adult, youth-youth, and adult-adult relationships to take root.

### Supporting Structures (*bedrock*)

The bedrock provides a solid foundation for the soil and all that grows within it. Similarly, organization structures (such as communications; staff hiring, training and retention practices; budget allocations) can be aligned to continually support and sustain positive relational climates where relationships thrive.

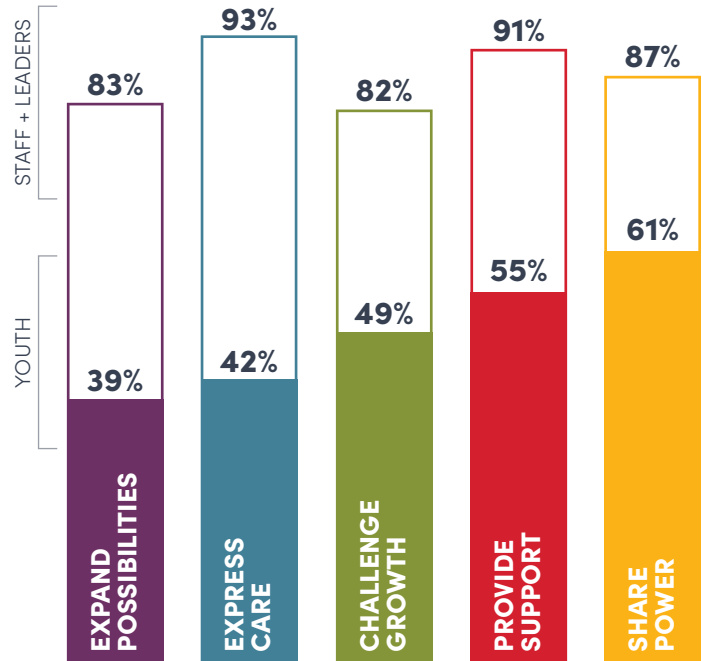
### Community Context (*air, sunshine, wind, and rain*)

Environmental factors above ground affect a tree and its roots, soil, and bedrock. Youth-serving organizations are similarly affected by societal norms, government policies, and other aspects of the broader community context.

## Perception Gap

There is often a **large gap** between what adults report and youth experience.

Source: Insights&Evidence (Search Institute, 2020)



level (Search Institute, 2019). Depending on the setting, only a minority of young people report experiencing strong developmental relationships that are linked to positive youth development outcomes (Boat et al., 2021b; Scales et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020; Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Houlberg, 2023; Search Institute, 2020). Less than 3 in 10 youth have strong developmental relationships with at least 4 of 5 important potential connections (parents, siblings, peers, teachers, youth program staff), and 2 in 10 youth have no such strong developmental relationships (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017).

Several of these relational barriers identified by young people were corroborated by school and OST staff distributed across the state of Minnesota in another study. From this diverse sample of 668 adults, 58% said that adults having different experiences than youth was the biggest barrier

to building relationships (Boat et al., 2020). This was followed by 49% that said staffs' hesitation to share power with youth gets in the way, whereas 43% attributed a lack of time as the problem and 41% identified the challenge of the structurally racist nature of the external systems around their classrooms and programs as the factor that makes relationship-building hard. Taken together, there is still work to be done to create a shared understanding of how developmental relationships are expressed and experienced in more cohesive ways. We also have to work together to remove the barriers that get in the way of building developmental relationships with youth.





## The Importance of a web of relationships

We have mostly conducted research on dyads, such as child-parent, student-teacher, peer-peer, mentee-mentor, and the attendant effects of those relationships on various youth outcomes. But those dyadic relationships, of course, unfold within a much broader web of relationships in young people’s lives – with teachers, coaches, friends and classmates, immediate and extended family, adults and other children in the neighborhood, youth programs, religious congregations, part-time workplaces, and other community settings. No matter how developmental a given relationship might be that a youth has, that single relationship is not all that young person needs, and it cannot by itself shape a flourishing, thriving life for a young person both now and in the future, even though it can make a considerable difference in developmental outcomes in the near-term.

Each relationship offers something different, in different circumstances, and with differing effects at different times in development. A relationship with a youth leader in a religious congregation may be just as developmental for a given young person as one with a teacher in a public school, for example, but the religious context of one allows and encourages a differing basis of connection and activities (i.e., with a specifically religious and/or spiritual overtone) than the more secular context of the other.

It is this activation not just of one dyadic relationship but a multitude of them of varying intensities and durations (in social capital theory, both the “strong” ties of bonding with people like oneself and the “weak” ties with others of differing status and power who can link one to a greater variety of otherwise less-accessible opportunities; Scales, Boat, & Pekel, 2020) that is needed

“It is impossible for any one adult to be all things to all youth at all times, but as a community we can.”

– Benjamin J. Houlberg, Ph.D., LMFT, Search Institute CEO

to help young people thrive right now and to put and keep them on the path to becoming thriving young adults. In the terms of every young person being “rooted in relationships,” for example, some roots go down deep into the soil, and some branch out horizontally, providing strength and flexibility in different directions and differing ways.

Each young person needs this web or root system of developmental relationships, available at different times, emphasizing different relational elements, in the service of differing youth needs and goals as they change over time. Collectively, such dynamic networks of relationships can produce the most enduring positive outcomes for young people.

The web of relationships does this through helping young people construct a strong identity that

is integrated across time and the spaces of their lives (Nagaoka et al., 2015). This includes a sense of agency and competencies to shape their life’s direction, and a firm belief that they are truly connected to communities of others who both care for them and for and with whom the young person desires to make meaningful contributions (Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Houtberg, 2022). For example, social responsibility (commitment to contribute to community and society) has been found to decline significantly from elementary to high school, but young people with a stronger web of relationships, including a more democratic and compassionate climate in their families, having trusted friends, and connectedness to school and community, have stronger commitments to acting in socially responsible ways (Wray-Lake et al., 2016).



Each relationship offers something different, in different circumstances, and with differing effects at different times in development.



## Cultivating a healthy relational ecosystem together

We know how invested parents, teachers, practitioners, coaches, and especially young people are in quality relationships. This has always been true and will continue to be true regardless of technological advances, political and economic climate or current data trends of youth outcomes. This is a consistent and cohesive message that we hear in our multiple interactions with youth-serving organizations, our focus groups, interviews, and survey data. In fact, roughly 9 out of 10 adults reported that staff in their school or organization view a relationship-rich culture as something worth investing in. Yet, considerable numbers (25%-41%) of staff and leaders also said relationships are often overlooked or undervalued as a topic for professional development. We have consistently found this gap between intent and impact. This was in part the motivation to explore and create a more action-oriented framework for building developmental relationships.

We also know how challenging the last several years have been for everyone. The increased mental health distress of youth, trauma from the pandemic, burnout among youth workers, teachers and parents, and the loneliness caused by the pandemic have had a toll on our social and emotional health. The last thing needed right now is for the message to be that parents, practitioners, and teachers just need to “do more.” What would happen if we started to ask how can we collectively “be more?”

### **How can we be more intentional in our efforts to cultivate relationships with young people?**

- Creating a shared understanding of developmental relationships
- Making a shared commitment to planning and implementing relational activities and approaches across all five elements
- Having a relational mindset of continual improvement as individuals *and* as a collective
- Utilizing relational data collection measures that capture multiple perspectives of expressed relational actions and how they are experienced

The Developmental Relationship Framework provides a map that youth-serving organizations can orient around for creating a relationally-rich climate as a collective. We are consistently excited and honored to hear about the innovative relational approaches and activities that practitioners are using based on this framework. The truth is relationships happen within and

beyond structured activities that occur in programs, classrooms, and other settings when organizations—including senior leaders, staff, as well as the youth and parenting adults they serve engage in day-to-day approaches that promote relationships (Aspen Institute, 2018). We refer to structured activities as those that require time to plan and have a beginning and end, whereas relational approaches are the small rituals and routines that over time positively impact the relational climate.

The Developmental Relationships Framework also provides the opportunity for us all to improve in one or more elements at any given time in our work with young people. We must have a relational mindset that is consistently striving for improvement and finding ways to meet the needs of young people. A relational climate of continuous improvement invites feedback and provides training and support so that people can continue to grow in their profession. Finally, if we say that relationships matter, we must measure them in a way that allows for the best approximate reality of how we are doing in youth-serving organizations. This requires utilizing valid measures of the quality of relationships from multiple perspectives. It also allows for a continuous pulse on how young people are experiencing the spaces and places that they are learning and growing in. Collecting meaningful data allows for the planning, dialogue and action necessary to improve. It helps move beyond a single perspective or feeling of what needs to happen and allows us to target issues as a collective for positive change.

### **How can we be more inclusive in our efforts to cultivate relationships with young people?**

- **Assessing who is and who is not experiencing a sense of belonging**
- **Making sure that your relational approaches and activities are culturally responsive**
- **Affirming the identities of all young people in your space**
- **Providing ample opportunity for youth voice and responding with action**

If we can all agree that every single young person deserves the opportunity to be seen, heard, valued, and safe, we need to start asking who is not feeling these things and why. By measuring what matters the most, we can do a better job creating culturally responsive approaches and activities that are targeted towards the youth who are lacking the conditions in their ecosystem to thrive. During the period of adolescence in particular, there is a strong need to answer the questions, “who am I?” and “where do I fit?”

These questions are central to identity formation and youth are creating their self-story based on the messages they are consistently hearing from the people around them. Reinforced external messages about capabilities, characteristics, or motivation get integrated into the young person’s internal narrative. “You don’t like math” or even worse “You are not very good at math” can turn into “I don’t care about math” or “I am not good at math.”

One of the core ways we can support young people is by how we are affirming them in their intersecting identities that are important to them. In a study with a sample of Hispanic/Latin(o,a,x) youth, we found that young people who experienced their schools as being culturally affirming and responsive reported higher levels of social-emotional learning despite experiencing school-based discrimination (Ramos Carranza, Boat & Hsieh, 2023). This was particularly true for youth who identified as a sexual minority. Feeling seen and valued creates an openness to learning and competencies to be able to manage your own emotions and connect to others.

Developmental relationships are a key to cultivating a sense of belonging for youth. Every single young person should have the opportunity to experience all of the relational actions identified in the Developmental Relationships Framework somewhere in their relational ecosystem. Equally important to creating inclusive climates are the relational actions youth observe from adults towards other peers. When youth see the affirming of their peers' identity, it reinforces the value that all youth belong in this space and holds potential for strengthening developmental relationships.

Another core developmental need for youth is having a sense of agency and having a say in their own lives. Providing authentic opportunities for youth to lead and express their voice in decisions has the dual advantage of promoting their sense of agency and it most often creates better solutions compared to an adult-only solution to a youth-oriented problem. The element of Share Power is not just allowing or elevating youth voice but also includes surrendering some control to allow youth to lead change in creating better environments for them and their peers. We have found that sharing power is a challenging relational action for many adults in authority (Chamberlain et al., 2020). Critical to inclusive environments is that youth voice and leadership is representative of the diverse identities, cultural, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds of the community.

### **How can we be more equitable in our efforts to cultivate relationships with young people?**

- Acknowledging and affirming the unique contribution that each young person makes to the community
- Identifying and seeking to remove any unique barriers for each young person
- Helping a young person connect to existing relationships and resources in their relational ecosystem
- Expanding the access to new relationships and resources that meet the individual needs of a young person

“Context is the key ingredient of PYD. This is so important because it moves us away from questions like “what are kids doing wrong?” and pushes us to ask “what can we change or improve about settings to better serve and support youth?” If we believe that all youth have strengths and capacity to thrive, this should drive our commitment to cultivating these strengths and to redressing disparities in opportunity, resources, supports, and biased treatment of youth.”

— Joanna Williams, Ph.D., M.S.Ed, Search Institute Senior Director of Research

The multidimensional nature of human development requires us to be able to acknowledge and affirm the uniqueness of every young person while also identifying the unique barriers and systemic disparities faced by youth, especially those from groups who have been disparaged or marginalized. In another study, we found that developmental relationships were significantly associated with a sense of purpose, resilience and reduced stress among 309 Black youth. Moreover, equitable school practices and acknowledging racial disparities in teaching were positively associated with a sense of purpose and resilience even in the face of racism and discrimination (Redmond, et al., under review). This suggests that developmental relationships are powerful and necessary for historically-marginalized youth but youth may benefit even more when schools and teachers affirm their racial identity and acknowledge the systemic inequities that exist.

We have collected data from more than 6 million youth with our research on the 40 Developmental Assets® and now Developmental Relationships that youth experience. The study of the 40 Developmental Assets® demonstrated the incredible strengths and assets that young people and communities already have. It is critical to identify and leverage community assets that already exist across the lives of young people. Communities that have faced socio-economic disadvantage as well as racism and discrimination are often characterized in ways that minimize their strengths and punctuate disparities. Yet, there are untapped assets that youth-serving organizations and schools can partner with to meet the unique needs of their youth.

For many youth, developmental relationships are necessary but not sufficient to overcome disparities that have existed in access to resources and opportunities. We have also found that developmental relationships coupled with the intention of providing access to opportunities and resources (e.g. social capital) is important for promoting thriving career and educational pathways for youth (Boat et al., 2021). An equity-centered approach to developmental relationships not only acknowledges the barriers that youth and families that have been pushed to the margins face but also works to provide the opportunities and resources needed for them to thrive.

## Resources Hub

### Tools and strategies that lead to action

While both parents and practitioners in youth-serving organizations have told us that the Developmental Relationships Framework is a valuable resource in itself, they also tell us that they need additional resources and support to fully integrate the framework into their everyday interactions with young people. Toward that end, we have created Search Institute's Resources Hub.

The [Resources Hub](#) is a research-based collection of free tools, activities, measures, and other resources designed to support you in helping young people succeed and thrive. Through the Resources Hub, youth-serving practitioners, managers, and leaders have access to a myriad resources ranging from self- and organizational assessments, to frameworks for building Developmental Relationship that can be embedded in daily practice, and research briefs that inform how to approach Developmental Relationships and build a relationship-rich environment where young people can thrive.

# Relationships are a journey and not a destination

All young people need developmental relationships. More specifically, all young people need to be part of a network of relationships with a range of people—parents, peers, program staff, educators—that support their growth across settings and across different points of development. Indeed, we should push ourselves to envision a world where all youth experience relationships in which each person feels cared for, supported, and challenged, where power is shared and possibilities are expanded. It is these kinds of relationships that nourish growth. Development is rooted in relationships, and while the roots of developmental relationships can sprout in many places, relationships are more likely to take root if they are supported by policies, practices, and structures.

After 10 years of building our Developmental Relationships Framework, we have identified major streams of research and practice that need considerably more attention. For instance, what do teachers and school leaders want and need to adapt and implement the Developmental Relationships Framework for the students in their schools? We are currently collaborating with educators who are invested in adapting and implementing the Developmental Relationships Framework, measures, and practices in ways that are culturally relevant to their school communities. Our collaborations reflect a commitment to continuous improvement and ongoing capacity-building with a shared goal of building positive, schoolwide relational climates.

Another critical question is how can we infuse developmental relationships into youth-serving organizations in ways that center equity and support organizational change? We, and our partners, are using collaborative improvement methods in a community of practice to address this question. Critical actors in this work include organizational leaders committed to understanding developmental relationships and racial equity, and to using data to enact change. Our shared goals are to create and sustain youth-serving organizational climates characterized by transformative developmental relationships and racial equity.

This kind of work will be the focus of Search Institute’s efforts over the next decade, in order to help organizations, communities, and individual change agents intentionally cultivate developmentally powerful and inclusive connections among adults and youth, among youth peers, and among the adults around youth, that together provide equitable opportunity for all young people.

All young people need developmental relationships. More specifically, all young people need to be part of a network of relationships with a range of people—parents, peers, program staff, educators—that support their growth across settings and across different points of development.

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**Search Institute is a nonprofit organization that partners with schools, youth programs, and other organizations to conduct and apply research that promotes positive youth development and equity.**



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