



**Developmental  
Relationships  
Help Young  
People Thrive**



# Developmental Relationships Help Young People Thrive

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Developmental relationships are essential to help young people discover how to become their best selves.

Through the benefits of developmental relationships, young people move beyond surviving to thriving. Strong developmental relationships help young people of every age, race, and socioeconomic background discover who they are, cultivate the ability to shape their own lives and destinies, and learn how to positively contribute to the world.

What are developmental relationships, and how can we **intentionally create** them in our schools, programs, families, and communities?



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# What Are Developmental Relationships?

Developmental relationships are close connections with adults, near-peers, and peers that help young people cultivate their abilities to shape their own lives, build resilience, and thrive.

These close connections are critically important for young people, especially those growing up in challenging circumstances.

## Where Do Young People Experience Developmental Relationships?

Research shows that young people thrive when they experience a strong web of developmental relationships in their families, classrooms, youth programs, and faith communities. Yet research shows that too few young people experience developmental relationships, and that they tend to decline as young people reach the critical adolescent years.

### Schools

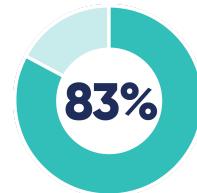
Though many students do not report experiencing strong student-teacher relationships, they play a critical role in student motivation and learning. Strong teacher-student relationships help students:

- Earn better grades in school
- Feel connected to their education
- Feel culturally respected and included
- Report their instruction as high quality

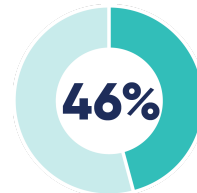
### Youth Programs

Youth programs—including recreation, athletics, arts, civic action and service, cultural identity, and religious groups—provide safe spaces where young people

Search Institute conducted a survey of nearly 15,000 young people and 700 adults and found that while



**83%** of the adults we surveyed reported being intentional about building developmental relationships with young people, only



**46%** of young people reported experiencing strong developmental relationships with adults.



can feel seen, known, and valued. These programs have a unique opportunity to deepen relationships with young people and promote positive youth development. A Search Institute study for the Student Conservation Association found that when young people experience strong developmental relationships with program leaders during a service experience, they are more likely to:

- Demonstrate leadership and social responsibility
- Develop a sense of community identity
- Set goals and stretch themselves to reach goals



**Youth programs provide safe spaces where young people can develop trustworthy relationships with adults and peers.**

## **Families**

Developmental relationships between youth and parenting adults are consistently associated with multiple areas of well-being and thriving for young people and young people in families that may be struggling with adverse circumstances, do better if they have strong relationships with parenting adults. Young people who experience stronger relationships with parenting adults are more likely to report:

- Greater social-emotional strengths such as self-awareness, emotional competence, openness to challenges, personal responsibility, and a willingness to take on challenges
- Higher academic motivation and achievement
- Stronger civic commitment and a desire to positively impact their surroundings

## **Peer-to-Peer Relationships**

Peer and near-peer relationships play a major role in young people's development. When youth programs focus on strengthening peer relationships, young people

report improvements in their self-confidence and life skills, academic motivation, and leadership skills.

### **What Difference Do Developmental Relationships Make?**

Young people who experience developmental relationships across different parts of their lives are more likely to show signs of positive development in many areas, including:

- Increased academic growth and learning
- Increased social-emotional growth and learning
- Increased sense of personal responsibility
- Reduced engagement in a variety of high-risk behaviors



Despite numerous studies demonstrating that such relationships are vital for young people’s learning, growth, and thriving, our society and communities continually underinvest and even undermine developmental relationships, and these crucial relationships are experienced even less among young people who come from marginalized communities.

A 2016 Search Institute study of 25,395 students in grades 6 through 12 showed that one in five youth report no strong relationships in their lives. That’s unconscionable, and it requires a profound reorientation to prioritize our collective approach to building a web of relationships that supports the young people who will build our future.

## **Social Capital: Building a Web of Relationships**

**We define social capital as the resources that arise from a web of relationships.**

Young people report being happier and healthier when they are surrounded by a web of relationships that challenge them to grow, learn, and discover new skills and talents. Unfortunately, school administrators and direct service staff find that organizational and funding priorities leave little time and few resources for relationship building.

The entire web of relationships—including peers, near peers, families, and other adults—matters. Those with higher levels of social capital, as well as a stronger and more diverse network, report greater progress toward their education or employment goals, more of a commitment to paying it forward to others, and belief in their collective efficacy to change education and employment systems to be more accessible and equitable.

Building the web requires an intentional and inclusive focus on relationships that is fully integrated into what an organization already does.



**Young people with developmental relationships are more likely to be resilient in the face of challenges and to grow up thriving.**

# Five Key Elements of Developmental Relationships

**The Developmental Relationships Framework** is made up of five elements, expressed in 20 specific actions. When young people experience these relationships in their families, schools, programs, and communities, they are more likely to be resilient in the face of challenges and to grow up thriving.

## The Developmental Relationships Framework is:

1

### 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.

2

### Challenge Growth

- Push me to keep getting better.
- Expect my best—Expect me to live up to my potential.
- Stretch—Push me to go farther.
- Hold me accountable—Insist I take responsibility for my actions.
- Reflect on failures—Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.

### 3

#### **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 in place limits that keep me on track.

### 4

#### **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.

### 5

#### **Expand Possibilities**

- Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.
- Inspire—Inspire me to see possibilities for my future.
- Broaden horizons—Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.
- Connect—Introduce me to people who can help me grow.

**[Download the Developmental Relationships Framework Here](#)**



**“We have to agree that all young people deserve to feel like they are people of value and they are safe. When we establish that and provide access to meet their basic needs, it’s pretty amazing to see their resilience. And if we move beyond that and begin thinking about their aspirations and potential, we can create experiences that challenge them to grow, expand their possibilities and connect them to bigger things – opportunities, resources and networks.”**

**Dr. Benjamin Houlberg** | President and CEO of Search Institute

## **Measuring Relationships**

In order to develop critical relationships in schools and programs, it’s important to address the needs of all young people. The best way to discover how to do that is to ask young people themselves, by administering youth self-report surveys. These measurements give schools, programs, coalitions, and other organizations the insights they need to improve programs and have a greater impact on the lives of young people.

### **The Developmental Relationships Survey**

Search Institute’s **Developmental Relationships Survey** measures the unseen factors that contribute to strong relationships between adults and youth. It helps schools and organizations examine their developmental relationships, social-emotional competencies, and equitable practices. The survey can be customized to meet your needs and helps schools and youth-serving organizations better understand and reflect on their developmental relationships, social-emotional competencies, and equitable environments.

### **Listening to Young People**

Measuring the effectiveness of relationships is the first step to being able to implement the kinds of solutions that young people need to be and become their best selves. Providing an environment that is equitable for relationships to thrive is a primary responsibility of every school and program. We need to understand young people’s experiences of bias and discrimination, perceptions of safety and justice, and their experiences with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) measures.

## Relationships for Equity

The losses of the COVID-19 pandemic and the untenable level of violence against people of color in this country highlight the stark racial inequalities and structural racism that exists at every level of our society. Every educational institution and youth program needs to develop just and equitable practices and strategies to ensure that every student, no matter their background, receives a high-quality education and the opportunities to thrive in school, work, and life.

Focusing on so-called achievement gaps is not a solution to inequities. Instead, we need to pay attention to “opportunity gaps,” including those related to developmental relationships.

Intentionally building strong relationships with young people from every background is a meaningful way to respond with determination to dismantle the unequal system that has harmed students and families.



## Strategies for Building Better Relationships

When we listen to what young people say about relationships, we discover a gap between their perception of relationships and that of the adults that surround them. Closing that gap means using tools and strategies to build stronger, better relationships.

## Tools

There are many tools available for adults to learn more about young people's experiences so organizations, leaders, and practitioners can gain insights and learn ways to intentionally build relationships.

- Some practitioners start with a **Relationships Check** to determine where relationships with young people are strong and where they can grow.
- School districts often undertake reviews of their approaches to social-emotional learning (SEL) by conducting a **Priority Setting Questionnaire**.
- **Levers for Change** is a practical tool that organizations use to identify how to move toward becoming a relationship-rich organization. It focuses on one or a limited number of changes that will help prioritize and deepen developmental relationships.
- The **Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE)** Framework provides a guide for educators and leaders who want to redesign public education to be more culturally responsive and equitable.
- Opportunities for **professional development** on a number of topics focused on building and improving developmental relationships at your youth-serving organization.

## Relationship Building Approaches

Search Institute has identified approaches to each of the five elements that make up a developmental relationship. These approaches are techniques that can be integrated into program or classroom activities.

*Visit our **Resources Hub** for a collection of tools, activities and measures designed to support you in helping young people succeed and thrive.*

## Relationships Stories

What does relationship-building look like in practice? Search Institute has worked with thousands of schools and youth-serving organizations to provide support and tools to make positive change in the lives of young people. The following are just a few examples:

- The **Georgetown Project** in Georgetown, Texas, helped equip young people with the tools to become engaged members of society. As a result of the student initiative, a new teen center opened up to serve the rapidly changing community.
- At **Pine River-Backus Schools in northern Minnesota**, educators partnered with Search Institute in a pilot program to increase student motivation by building social-emotional strengths. The REACH program focused on a framework with five areas: Relationships, Effort, Aspirations, Cognition, and Heart. Teachers learned to forge meaningful relationships with students by identifying and encouraging their sparks.
- At **Project Cornerstone** in California’s Silicon Valley, youth leaders helped participants to learn conflict resolution and build positive peer relationships that helped them become more engaged in schools.

## A Better Future

Across the country, and the world, people who work closely with young people are recognizing the rewards of building **relationship-rich organizations**.

When young people are supported and challenged to become their best selves, a new world is possible.



**In your hands, youth development research can advance equity and help all young people thrive.**

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