

SEARCH INSTITUTE STUDY:

AN EMERGING FRAMEWORK FOR FOSTERING PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Educators and out-of-school time youth-serving practitioners have much to learn from young people about their relationships with other young people their age. Peer relationships are widely recognized as critical developmental contexts for human development and thriving. And yet, the prevailing narrative of peer relationships in K-12 education and youth development is one of risk, rather than the opportunities that come from close connections with friends and communities of peers.

Why do peer relationships matter?

Search Institute takes the position that peer-to-peer relationships are an integral part of young people's web of developmental relationships. Peer-to-peer relationships, which include relationships between friends, near peers, romantic relationships, and communities of peers (e.g., in classrooms, out-of-school time settings) are critical resources to young people's development¹. Peer relationships that occur dyadically (e.g., between two youth) and in collectives (e.g., among groups or social networks) play a foundational role in strengthening young people's social-emotional competencies that support thriving. They can also protect youth in the face of diverse challenges, such as bullying and academic stress as well as more complex social dynamics, such as structural inequities in communities. Healthy peer relationships in adolescence sets the stage for healthy relationships and overall well-being in adulthood². Peer relationships are distinct from many of the other important relationships in a young person's life as these are often the only relationships and sources of support that young people choose for themselves.

¹ Brown, B. B., & Larson, J. (2009). Peer relationships in adolescence. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology: Contextual influences on adolescent development* (pp. 74-103). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy002004>

² Allen, J. P., Costello, M., Kansky, J., & Loeb, E. L. (2022). When friendships surpass parental relationships as predictors of longterm outcomes: Adolescent relationship qualities and adult psychosocial functioning. *Child Development*, 93(3), 760-777.

How did we begin to shape this emerging framework?

Taking learnings from our previous research and review of existing research on peer relationships, we formed a team of five youth researchers from across the country and partnered with [Youthprise](#) to authentically engage with young people in exploring the typology and differences in peer relationships, the impact of these relationships, and the identification of ways adults can help nurture these relationships. The youth researchers co-designed the research activities with us. We committed to their voice as central to the overall design of the project. In partnership, we collected qualitative data through a combination of youth-led focus groups and interviews with other youth ages 14-18, and engaged in collaborative mapping exercises as an analytic and meaning-making team. At the completion of data collection, the youth researchers reviewed transcripts from each of the focus groups and identified and coded recurring themes. Collaboratively refined variations of themes became the foundation of the emerging Framework for Fostering Peer Relationships, which will continue to evolve as Search Institute continues to learn alongside young people and adults in this arena.

The emerging Framework for Fostering Peer Relationships is one step towards closing a critical implementation gap many adults' experience: a lack of understanding about how they can support youth in cultivating peer relationships. This framework is intended as an aid for adults seeking to be more intentional in providing more direct support for youth around peer relationships and creating spaces where peer relationships thrive.

What does this look like in day-to-day practices?

The framework includes four actions: (1) make mental health normative; (2) model and promote healthy communication, (3) support us in navigating conflict, and (4) promote authentic interaction. Educators and youth-serving practitioners can start here to learn more from the perspectives of youth about the ways adults can support peer relationships. To identify these actions, the youth researchers used guiding principles as criteria for selection.

- **Integrity:** Actions align with the values of this project and come from a place of empathy, compassion, and intentionality.
- **Asset-based:** Actions focus on strengths and how to continue to grow rather than thinking about deficits/weaknesses, particularly of youth themselves.
- **Youth voice:** Actions incorporate accessible language that represents what we heard in focus groups and legitimizes experiences/feelings, generally supporting and uplifting young people.
- **Responsive:** Actions resonate and respond to youth experience.
- **Actionable:** Actions allow adults who work with youth to easily understand and act in ways that better support positive peer relationships in K-12 and out-of-school time programs.

Our hope is that educators and youth-serving practitioners can gain knowledge and learnings about peer relationships that can be taken up across two practical dimensions: (1) in relational practices adults can do with youth and encourage between peers, and (2) through facilitating the climate and structure to support peer-to-peer relationships. Centering relational practices and creating the conditions for a supportive climate and structure, provides peers the space to freely express their identities, strengthen their relationships across differences, and ground into resources and opportunities that help them feel comfortable and seen by their peers. The following actions capture learnings from the youth researchers, and then the actions build upon those learnings to provide educators and youth-serving practitioners with strategies they can apply to support strong, positive peer relationships.

ACTION 1: Make mental health normative.

"I think that talking about mental health is definitely great and having an awareness of what the other is going through, but if you're having a panic attack, I don't think your friend should be the first person you should turn to, especially if they have something similar that could trigger them." -Youth Focus Group Participant

What youth want adults to know:

Mental health is serious, and not always something we feel comfortable turning to our peers for support. And yet, we know our mental health impacts every aspect of our life: our attitude, our behavior, our physical health, how we show up at school and in organizations and most importantly our relationships. We also sometimes feel the weight of other people's mental health.

Ways adults can help:

Ways you can cultivate and prioritize mental health in peer relationships include:

- Create opportunities for us to connect 1:1 where you can support my individual mental health and equip me with the language and skills needed to talk about mental health with my peers.
- Make discussion of mental health normal. Let's talk about issues like self-care, stress management, joy, depression, healing, what to say if I'm worried about a peer, and how to access and engage adult help.
- Talk openly and often about the role of peers in supporting (and, sometimes, compromising) each other's mental health, providing concrete examples of how to support each other, and advocate for one's own mental health within the context of a relationship.

ACTION 2: Model and promote healthy communication.

“To nurture healthy communication [adults] may provide a poster with steps towards navigating conversation/conflict like acknowledging the other person’s perspective and respectfully describing your situation. Or this could look like establishing expectations/general principles for communication, and stepping in when observed communication does not meet basic expectations.” –Youth Researcher

What youth want adults to know:

We know how to talk to our friends. We have our own styles. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t also sometimes need your advice. Because relationships can be hard, and communication sometimes unclear or a topic too tough to know what to do.

Ways adults can help:

Ways you can model and promote healthy communication include:

- Model what good communication looks like (in person and digitally). These include how to:
 - ◇ Communicate in ways that show mutual respect,
 - ◇ Listen to understand rather than simply respond,
 - ◇ Engage in the bidirectional give-and-take in conversations
 - ◇ Compromise in ways that center and enrich a relationship,
 - ◇ Be and stay open to diverse and opposing ideas.
- Talk with us about what unhealthy communication looks like too, so that we know it when we see it and can do something.
- Set norms for how we communicate with each other (and you and other adults) in our shared space. These norms should reflect what we know about good communication, how to disagree, and what to do when these norms are violated.

ACTION 3: Support us in navigating conflict.

"I try to understand both sides of the story. And from there, try to find a common ground without bias. And first I try to talk to people, understand their point of view so I can actually know what happened. And then they can both share their point of views. And then from there we can see if any misunderstandings happened and then apologize and try to move forward." –Youth Interview Participant

What youth want adults to know:

Conflict is always framed as a negative experience to completely avoid, but encountering conflict is normal in all relationships. When handled well, conflict can even strengthen and deepen a relationship. Navigating conflict is a skill that must be developed and practiced as it allows both parties to evaluate not only themselves, but their peers in different situations.

Ways adults can help:

Ways you can support us in navigating conflict include:

- Give us autonomy in how we speak about the conflicts we encounter to honor our experience. Validate and reassure.
- Provide space for us to process and develop our own thoughts about the conflict. We need safe people to turn to. Open, clear lines of communication with us helps.
- Support us in identifying healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationships.
- Validate us in our decisions to end or stay in relationships or to have hard conversations.

ACTION 4: Promote authentic interaction.

"If I have to mask myself around someone, I'm very good at appearing extroverted...But, at the end of the day, if a friendship leaves me feeling drained because I'm not being myself, I don't want to continue to partake in that friendship..., that for me, is the main thing of [how] I define a relationship as good: Do I feel drained after?" -Youth Focus Group Participant

What youth want adults to know:

Our relationships often grow out of shared interests and values. We need help in forging connections with not only the peers that we share similarities with but also those who seem different than us. There is strength in acknowledging and integrating diversity within youth settings, as it helps us expand our open-mindedness to those we might least expect. You can help us create intentional moments for connection, build our community, and provide us an opening for deeper peer engagement.

Ways adults can help:

Ways you can support us in keeping it real in our interactions with each other include:

- Embrace opportunities to create connections. Use group assignments and activities to help us connect and explore each other's sparks, experiences, and ways of showing up in the world.
- Foster an environment where we can be ourselves in full recognition of our intersecting identities and background.
- Help us find commonalities even where differences exist, by modeling how we share about interests and hobbies and our backgrounds.
- Providing opportunities such as setting aside time for us to come together and explore can go a long way. The more we get the sense that socializing with different people can be beneficial, the more those interactions turn into connections in and out of school time.

Adding Our Voice to the Work

Working and learning side-by-side with a team of youth researchers, we collaboratively created this Framework for Fostering Peer Relationships as just one step towards our overall focus on understanding and nurturing the developmental relationships young people need to thrive. Search Institute will continue to deepen our work in the peer relationships space through research, and collaboration with schools, youth programs, families, and communities to co-create practical tools for strengthening developmental relationships.

We intend to keep central the following in our work:

- **Engage youth as researchers, co-designers, and experts on peer relationships:** Youth are the experts of their experiences. As we move the peer relationships theme into the core of Search Institute's work, we are committed to centering youth voice and experience in the strategy by engaging young people as collaborators. As we do this, we also commit to doing the important internal capacity work mindsets, skill development, structural analysis required to learn, grow, create, and ideate alongside young people as full and authentic partners.
- **Deepen and Expand:** We will continue to build a nuanced understanding of the significant differences that exist across relationships and perspectives of relationships by taking a multi-dimensional and multi-cultural view of relationships. We will consider the many different types of peer relationships that exist and the many contexts in which they form like in classrooms, on sports teams, and in online/virtual settings. This includes gaining perspectives of peer relationships across lines of difference, and that peer relationships take root in close and loose friendships, with acquaintances you interact with in classes, relationships across differences, with strangers, and others.
- **Build Partnerships:** We will identify organizational arrangements that promote the creation and strengthening of tools and approaches to peer-to-peer relationships. We will form networks and learning communities of OST and schools to innovate, design, test, and improve tools, strategies, and practices designed to operationalize the peer-to-peer relationships framework.
- **Continuous Improvement:** We will work to improve upon the quality of the peer relationships framework by developing, refining, and testing measures of peer-to-peer relationships. We will study how youth experience the use of the framework.