

Summary of Key Findings

Don't Forget the Families

The Missing Piece in America's Effort to Help All Children Succeed

Preparing all children and youth to live productive and fulfilling lives is a critical responsibility and opportunity for society. Thanks in part to a recent movement for collective impact, schools, programs, and entire communities are increasingly working together to achieve that objective.

However, with important exceptions, many of those efforts struggle to engage families meaningfully, much less as full partners. This gap leaves one of the most powerful influences in the lives of children and youth on the sidelines.

Part of the challenge is that too many institutions and professionals have largely given up on families, believing that the challenges families face and the problems they sometimes create are beyond their reach and responsibility. As a result, sometimes those institutions ignore families. Other times they set up systems and supports that compensate for the failures they perceive in families. And even when schools and programs do engage families, they typically focus on asking parents to support the work of the school or program through activities such as serving on committees, helping with homework, fundraising, and volunteering to lead programs.

All of these approaches—from ignoring family engagement altogether to involving parents in the work of schools and programs—overlook the one thing about which parents care deeply and that can powerfully benefit their children's development: relationships in the home.

Based on a study of 1,085 U.S. parenting adults of 3 to 13 year olds, *Don't Forget the Families* makes the case that strengthening family *relationships* is a critical but undervalued strategy for helping children learn and grow up successfully. It introduces a framework of developmental relationships, which articulates concrete actions that families can intentionally embrace and

consistently practice that help children develop the character strengths they need as they grow up. In the process, this report offers a fresh, potentially powerful approach to unleashing the capacities of families to be more active contributors to the schools, organizations, and communities that serve their children.

What are developmental relationships?

Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people develop the character strengths to discover who they are, gain the ability to shape their own lives, and learn how to interact with and contribute to others. These relationships are characterized by five essential actions, each of which is described from the perspective of a young person:

- 1. Express Care:** Show that you like me and want the best for me.
- 2. Challenge Growth:** Insist that I try to continuously improve.
- 3. Provide Support:** Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.
- 4. Share Power:** Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.
- 5. Expand Possibility:** Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.

The complete framework is in Display 1.

How are families doing?

At least seven out of ten parenting adults reported that they take the following actions in their relationships with children frequently and effectively: Express Care, Provide Support, and Challenge Growth (Display 2). The two remaining actions are taken less often and less effectively: Share Power and Expand Possibility.

This report shows that families from all backgrounds experience similar levels of developmental relationships.

Display 1

Search Institute’s developmental relationships framework

This framework of developmental relationships—which will continue to be refined based on ongoing research—identifies five essential actions supported by a total of 20 action steps that contribute to young people developing key character strengths and achieve a range of positive life outcomes. Each action is bidirectional, with each person being influenced by and influencing the other person. For the purpose of clarity, however, the framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person in a developmental relationship.

Express Care: Show that you like me and want the best for me.

- **Listen**—Pay attention when you are with me.
- **Be Warm**—Let me know that you like being with me and express positive feelings toward me.
- **Invest**—Commit time and energy to doing things for and with me.
- **Show Interest**—Make it a priority to understand who I am and what I care about.
- **Be Dependable**—Be someone I can count on and trust.

Challenge Growth: Insist that I try to continuously improve.

- **Inspire**—Help me see future possibilities for myself.
- **Expect**—Make it clear that you want me to live up to my potential.
- **Stretch**—Recognize my thoughts and abilities while also pushing me to strengthen them.
- **Limit**—Hold me accountable for appropriate boundaries and rules.

Provide Support: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

- **Encourage**—Praise my efforts and achievements.
- **Guide**—Provide practical assistance and feedback to help me learn.
- **Model**—Be an example I can learn from and admire.
- **Advocate**—Stand up for me when I need it.

Share Power: Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.

- **Respect**—Take me seriously and treat me fairly.
- **Negotiate**—Give me a voice in making decisions that affect me.
- **Respond**—Understand and adjust to my needs, interests, and abilities.
- **Collaborate**—Work with me to accomplish goals and solve problems.

Expand Possibility: Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.

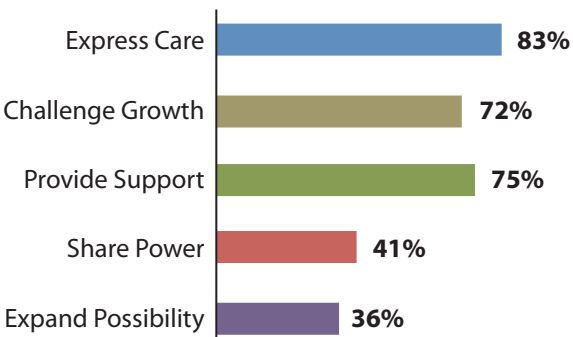
- **Explore**—Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.
- **Connect**—Introduce me to people who can help me grow.
- **Navigate**—Help me work through barriers that could stop me from achieving my goals.

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Display 2

Developmental relationships in families

Percentages of the parenting adults surveyed whose responses yielded a score of 75% or higher (proposed as an optimal level) for the five essential actions in developmental relationships.



Parenting adults were as likely to report developmental relationships across differences of race or Hispanic ethnicity, education, household income, immigrant status, sexual orientation, and community size.

That said, this study also highlights some important differences in families' experience of developmental relationships. It finds that developmental relationships were *less common* for:

- older children (within the sample of 3 to 13 year olds);
- parenting adults who are stepparents;
- boys compared to girls; and
- families that have financial struggles.

Why developmental relationships matter

When parenting adults reported that they have stronger relationships with their children, they were also more likely to report that their children are on track in several areas of development, including key character strengths, such as taking responsibility, managing emotions, and being concerned for others (Display 2).

Within the five essential actions in a developmental relationship, the one that is most consistently and strongly associated with positive development is Share Power. This finding suggests that Sharing Power may be particularly

catalytic for propelling children and youth on a positive life path.

Critical shifts for the future

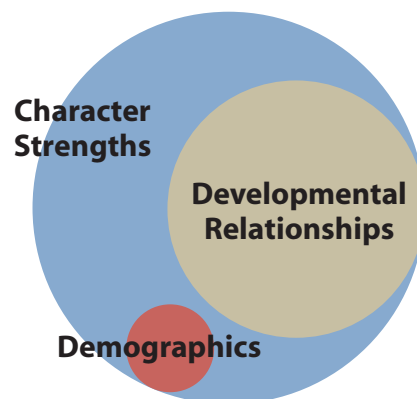
If taken seriously, this study's findings raise two sets of important, interlocking questions about how we focus energy in local, state, and national efforts to help all children succeed. The first questions focus on how we move beyond platitudes about the importance of relationships in young people's lives. How do we become much more intentional and specific about the kinds of relationships kids need at home, at school, and in other places they spend time?

The second set of question revolves around our assumptions about families, their roles in young people's lives, and the fundamental ways schools, organizations, and systems relate to parenting adults and families. Do

Display 3

Predicting young people's character strengths

Developmental relationships in families play a powerful role in children's growth. Based on analyses of the association between overall developmental relationships and a composite measure of character strengths, developmental relationships in families contribute 42% of the difference in parents' reports of key character strengths. Demographics such as income, race or Hispanic ethnicity, and family composition contribute 4% of the variance.



Note: Based on stepwise regression analysis.

we truly believe that all kinds of families matter, and are we willing to invest in unleashing and reinforcing their capacities to ensure that children have the relationships, supports, and opportunities they need?

When schools, organizations, and networks do reinvest in engaging families, it cannot be business as usual. Six shifts are needed in the approaches taken to recognize and engage with families as important actors and full partners in nurturing key character strengths and supporting children's success in school and life. These shifts call leaders in organizations, communities, and nations to:

1. Listen first to families rather than just developing and sending messages that don't resonate or motivate.
2. Focus on building relationships with families, rather than only providing programs.
3. Highlight families' strengths, even amid challenges, rather than adopting and designing approaches based on negative stereotypes.
4. Encourage families to experiment with new practices that fit their lives, rather than giving them expert advice on what they need to do.
5. Emphasize parenting as a relationship more than a set of techniques.
6. Broaden coalitions focused on young people's success to actively engage families as a focal point for strengthening developmental relationships.

Tips and relationship-building activities

As a starting point in responding to these findings, the report concludes with a sampling of concrete ideas and activities that families can use to explore developmental relationships. These ideas illustrate that families do this through the everyday ways they interact with, care for, and invest in their relationships together.

These tips and relationship-building activities offer practical steps forward in implementing two of the shifts

ParentFurther

a Search Institute resource for families

Visit Search Institute's website for parenting adults to explore developmental relationships in your family. It includes quizzes, ideas, discussion starters, and more than 100 family activities based on the framework of developmental relationships.

that schools, organizations, and coalitions need to make: Recognizing parenting as a relationship, and encouraging families to experiment with new practices together.

The potential for impact

This report joins a growing body of evidence that shows the powerful role of relationships and social capital in building community and addressing inequities. This research reinforces the call for both strengthening the developmental and relational infrastructure while also working to counteract the structural injustices that are all too pervasive.

Though this report focuses on relationships in families, the broader vision highlights the power and need to understand and strengthen a web of important adult and peer relationships across all areas of kids' lives.

The good news is that there is a rich but perhaps untapped reservoir of relational power across the economic and cultural spectrum in the United States. It is already playing a big role in children's lives. It lies in the families, schools, programs, neighborhoods, communities, and virtual spaces where our children and youth live and learn. With intentionality, it has even more potential to address the challenges that young people face while also nurturing in them key character strengths that are foundational for success in life.

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Discovering what kids need to succeed

Pekel, K., Roehlkepartain, E. C., Syvertsen, A. K., & Scales, P. C. (2015). *Don't forget the families: The missing piece in America's efforts to help all children succeed (summary of key findings)*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

The complete study is available at
www.search-institute.org/dff

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