Search INSTITUTE

Discovering what kids need to succeed

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The Developmental Relationships Framework

Imagine what would happen if we could surround young people – in their families, schools, programs and neighborhoods – with the kinds of relationships through which they develop character strengths such as positive identity, agency, and commitment to community. That is the objective of the Developmental Relationships Project, a multiyear initiative through which Search Institute is conducting research and developing solutions that will help organizations that serve young people start and strengthen close connections in their lives. The Project began in 2013 with the creation of the Developmental Relationships Framework, which has since been the basis of several quantitative and qualitative studies and has been shared with thousands of practitioners and parents across the country. Based on that research and feedback, we have revised the Framework, which is summarized below.

Elements	Actions	Definitions
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 further.
	• **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**	Defend 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 more people who can help me develop and thrive.

How Has the Framework Been Tested?

The original framework grew out of focus groups with youth, parents, educators, youth workers, and others as well as a review of the literature. Since then, we have:

- Introduced the framework to thousands of educators, youth workers, and parents;

- Conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with youth in different settings; and

- Examined student-teacher and parent-child relationships (including youth-parent pairs) through national* and pilot studies.

What Have We Learned So Far?

Several themes are emerging across the studies we have conducted to date:

- Developmental relationships are associated with multiple character strengths, including motivation to learn and personal responsibility, after controlling for demographic factors.

- Young people are least likely to experience sharing power and expanding possibilities.

- Sharing power is the area most strongly associated with multiple positive outcomes.

- Youth experiencing financial strain are less likely to experience developmental relationships.

- Youth with strong relationships are more resilient in the face of stress and trauma.

What Questions Remain to Be Examined?

Numerous critical questions drive Search Institute's research agenda moving forward.

- How are developmental relationships consistent and unique across *cultures and contexts?*

- How are *different relationships* (e.g., parent, teacher, peer, mentor) developmental in different ways? How do these different relationships complement each other?

- To what extent do developmental relationships *contribute to character strengths* in domains of identity, agency, and commitment to community, which in turn predict success in school, work, and other areas of life?

- What *intensity* and *longevity* is needed for developmental relationships to have an impact?

What's Next?

Research and Development: The heart of Search Institute's research and development agenda is to build a robust understanding of developmental relationships through *mixed-methods studies* with diverse populations of youth, examining relationships with parents, peers, mentors, teachers, and other caring adults.

In addition to mixed-methods observational studies (including longitudinal), we seek opportunities to conduct *experimental studies* to test the hypothesis that developmental relationships are key variables in effective interventions to address inequities and improve youth outcomes.

Improvement Solutions: Search Institute works with schools, youth organizations, and community coalitions to understand and strengthen relationships in young people's lives using the strategies and tools of improvement science. We are currently piloting two solution packages:

- *The REACH Process,* which focuses on strengthening relationships in schools as catalysts for students' academic motivation.

- *Keep Connected,* which focuses on strengthening parent-youth relationships as young people enter middle school.

* The first national study of developmental relationships is *Don't Forget the Families: The Missing Piece in America's Efforts to Help All Children Succeed* (www.search-institute.org/dff).