

# REFRAMING DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

**A FrameWorks MessageMemo**

**July 2019**

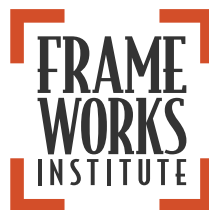
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# Introduction

## MOVE FROM NARROW AND SIMPLE TO CRITICAL AND COMPLEX

Why would arguably the most fundamental human experience—forming relationships and bonding with other people—require reframing? Issues often require reframing because people lack familiarity with the issue or it isn't salient in people's thinking. Yet, in this case, people have deep experiential familiarity with relationships and universally recognize their importance.

What, then, is the problem? Relationships require reframing because while people have an intuitive and profound understanding of some aspects of relationships, widespread cultural assumptions obscure other aspects. Experts on developmental relationships have identified a multifaceted set of truths about relationships, including how they can be formed and sustained, their role in development, and how society shapes and is shaped by them. Many of these truths remain entirely out of sight for members of the public.

When people answer key questions about relationships—*who, what, where, why, how* and *when*—they consistently focus on *one* aspect rather than seeing the *many* aspects of the issue. If the manifold character of relationships is understood, this generates a profoundly different orientation toward relationships and—specifically—how our society should approach them collectively, through policies and programs. Reframing is needed to promote the following series of shifts in how the public thinks about and understands relationships:

- **Who:** *From* assuming that, at the end of the day, only family relationships truly matter for development *to* recognizing that young people can and should have developmental relationships with **many different kinds of adults and peers**, including adults outside the family.
- **What:** *From* only seeing one feature of relationships as critical—caring—*to* seeing that, in order to promote positive development, relationships must have **multiple key features** in addition to care: challenges that lead to growth; mutual support; shared power; and expanding possibilities.
- **Where:** *From* thinking of developmental relationships as happening at home *to* recognizing the **wide range of spaces and places** where they can happen.

- **Why:** *From* a singular focus on young people’s individual success as the reason positive relationships matter *to* a recognition that developmental relationships have **diverse benefits**. These include benefits for both adults and young people involved in them, the ability to promote inclusion and more equitable opportunities in communities, and broader benefits for society.
- **How and when:** *From* assuming that relationships are shaped by individuals’ willingness to engage in them *to* the understanding that **a wide variety of influences**—especially features of contexts and places—shape how and when relationships can form and be sustained.

This MessageMemo outlines a reframing strategy—a *Cultivating Connections* overarching master frame—that can affect these shifts. This strategy has emerged from empirical research and has a demonstrated ability to broaden and deepen understanding of developmental relationships and to build support for the policies, programs, and systemic changes that promote them.

Effective framing requires that communicators paint a more varied picture of developmental relationships. It should expand and diversify what developmental relationships look like, who is involved, where they take place, how and when they happen, and why they matter. The *Cultivating Connections* master frame is woven from individual frame elements that include a name, an orienting value, a multifaceted and flexible explanatory metaphor, illustrative explanatory examples, and effective messengers. While each element serves specific purposes, together these elements expand and broaden the picture of developmental relationships.

This reframing strategy is not a message, and it is not a set of specific words to copy and paste into communications. Rather, it offers ways of talking about and explaining developmental relationships that can be used flexibly, adapted for different speakers and audiences, and adjusted for various channels or venues. In this MessageMemo we introduce the strategy, provide the evidence of its effectiveness, explain its flexible uses, and provide some examples of how it can be included within messages.

### **What Communications Research Does a Sector Need to Reframe an Issue?**

- **What does the research on developmental relationships say?** To distill expert consensus on developmental relationships, FrameWorks conducted interviews from September 2017 to November 2017 with 14 leading developmental relationships experts. These data were supplemented by a review of relevant academic and advocacy literature and refined during two feedback sessions with experts and leaders in the field.

- **How do members of the public think?** To document the cultural understandings the public draws on to make sense of developmental relationships, FrameWorks conducted in-depth cognitive interviews and analyzed the resulting transcripts to identify the implicit, shared understandings and assumptions—what we call “cultural models”—that structure public thinking and practitioner and policymaker assumptions. A total of twenty interviews with members of the public were conducted between Philadelphia, PA, San Antonio, TX, and San Pedro, CA. On-the-street interviews with members of the public later in the research process provided further confirmation of these shared understandings and assumptions, although these shorter interviews tend to elicit primarily the most top-of-mind cultural models.
- **Which frames shift thinking?** To identify effective ways of talking about developmental relationships, FrameWorks researchers developed and tested a set of candidate messages. Four primary methods were used to explore and refine possible reframes:
  - On-the-street interviews involving rapid, face-to-face testing of frame elements for their ability to prompt productive and robust understandings of and discussions about developmental relationships. A total of 49 interviews were conducted in September and October 2018.
  - A naming experiment—conducted via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk service—involving 821 participants to test whether “developmental relationships” is the most productive term to use in communications.
  - A series of experimental surveys involving a nationally representative sample of 6,254 respondents to test the effectiveness of a variety of frames on public understanding and attitudes, and support for policies.
  - A series of qualitative, group-based tests with a total of 36 people to explore how the most effective frames worked in conversational settings. Persistence trials investigated the frames’ effectiveness with members of the public.

All told, more than 6,300 people from across the United States were included in this research. See the Appendix for a more detailed methods discussion.

# Anticipating Public Thinking

Before designing communications on a complex social issue, we need to know how and why communications might go awry. When people don't know much about how an issue works, advocates need framing strategies that can build conceptual understanding quickly and accurately. When strong understandings do exist but are at odds with research and evidence, advocates need strategies that can shift perspectives and open up new ways of thinking. A systematic assessment of where, and how, public thinking differs from expert consensus enables communicators to better understand how to deploy a framing strategy and to select tactics.

Members of the public have a narrow understanding of young people's relationships—of their basic characteristics, the places where and people with whom they can occur, how they are influenced by context, and how they benefit young people, adults, and society as a whole. The following represent the most important challenges that emerge from the public's existing understandings of developmental relationships.<sup>1</sup>

**People have limited understanding of *what* developmental relationships involve.** Experts argue that in order for a relationship to be considered developmental, it must be bi-directional and facilitate growth in at least one person in the relationship. More specifically, they explain that developmental relationships involve five distinct features that catalyze development:

1. Care is expressed
2. Challenges lead to growth
3. Support is provided
4. Power is shared
5. Possibilities are expanded.

In contrast, members of the public tend to think of relationships as unidirectional—adults supporting youth—rather than as bi-directional and reciprocal. And people tend to focus on caring to the exclusion of other features of relationships. While members of the public do not reject the other features of developmental relationships, they do not generally focus on them or recognize their importance.

**People have a narrow view of *who* can and should be involved in developmental relationships with children and youth and *where* these relationships can happen.** Experts note that developmental relationships can occur across many settings and with different kinds of people. They take place virtually everywhere—in out-of-school and athletics programs, clubs, juvenile justice settings, mentorship programs, places of employment, and faith-based settings. They also occur in informal settings, such as social gatherings and everyday neighborhood interactions. As young people interact with others across these spaces, they can form developmental relationships with a wide variety of people, such as nuclear and extended family members, peers, school staff, coaches, religious leaders, youth organization volunteers, and other adults in the community.

In contrast, when members of the public think about the relationships that matter for young people, they focus almost exclusively on familial relationships and the home environment. While people certainly recognize that young people have relationships with peers and other adults, they do not tend to see these relationships as having a critical role in supporting positive development. They also have difficulty considering places and settings outside the home—and, to a lesser extent, school—where children and youth can develop and form developmental relationships.

**People do not recognize *how* social environments and institutional contexts shape relationships.** Experts argue that social circumstances can alternately enable or impede the formation and maintenance of relationships. For example, poverty can limit young people's access to relationships by destabilizing living situations and limiting their opportunities to engage in activities where they might develop relationships. Racial discrimination can not only directly interfere with relationship development through bias, but—like poverty—also creates inequitable circumstances that limit opportunities to develop relationships, like poverty. And if institutions like schools and social systems do not prioritize relationships, it can be difficult for people in these spaces—like teachers and social workers—to build relationships with young people. Experts argue that developmental relationships can be actively promoted through policies that direct institutions to prioritize relationship building and through programs that intentionally create the conditions for positive relationships to develop.

The public, by contrast, assumes that relationships are shaped by personal motivation—specifically, whether or not the adults in a child's life care. To the extent that people draw a link between poverty and lack of positive relationships, they tend to attribute this to a negative culture that does not prioritize young people's success. In other words, people focus on personal and, to some extent, cultural influences on relationships, but do not see how social structures and institutions shape relationships. In turn, they do not see the need for policies and programs that promote developmental relationships.

**People have a narrow understanding of the goals and benefits of developmental relationships.** Experts explain that developmental relationships have a wide range of positive effects for young people, adults, and society as a whole. For young people, developmental relationships promote educational and career success, social and emotional health, and can help young people cope with adverse experiences, social discrimination, and exclusion. When developmental relationships are cultivated and nurtured for all children, they can advance equity in developmental outcomes. Adults who are involved in developmental relationships with young people also benefit, experiencing positive self-worth, a sense of belonging, and for those engaged in relationships as part of their work, greater job satisfaction, among other benefits. Developmental relationships also have positive economic, social, and civic benefits at community and societal levels.

When members of the public think about the purposes and benefits of relationships, they recognize that relationships can benefit young people by helping them develop useful skills and promoting their wellbeing, but benefits for adults and society as a whole are, for the most part, not on people's radars.



# Framing Recommendations

The research presented below suggests that to build understanding, engagement and support for the programs and policies that promote developmental relationships among members of the public, communicators should use a *Cultivating Connections* master frame. This frame emphasizes the varied nature of developmental relationships and provides new answers to the “who, what, when, where, and why” questions presented below.

- 1. What are developmental relationships?** An effective frame will shift thinking away from the idea that caring is the mechanism that determines the quality of relationships. It will instead move people towards the five core features of relationships that result in positive developmental growth. In addition to the idea that care is expressed, communicators also have to place other features—challenges lead to growth, support is provided, power is shared, and possibilities are expanded—within a larger, explanatory frame.
- 2. Who is involved in developmental relationships?** An effective frame expands thinking about who is involved in developmental relationships with children and youth. The strategy below suggests framing tools that can broaden people’s understanding of the *types* of adults who can establish developmental relationships with young people. The strategy simultaneously draws attention to young people’s differential needs in regards to developmental relationships and their differential access to creating and sustaining developmental relationships.
- 3. Where do developmental relationships occur?** An effective strategy brings attention to the multiple places where children establish developmental relationships beyond the home environment.
- 4. When and how do developmental relationships take place?** Well-framed messages will explain how places can either facilitate or constrain developmental relationships and disrupt the public’s tendency towards thinking about relationships as being shaped solely by the characteristics of the people involved.
- 5. Why are developmental relationships necessary?** An effective framing strategy broadens people’s understanding of the potential outcomes of developmental relationships. With this strategy, people can gain a broader sense of the positive outcomes for individual young people, such as greater academic achievement, development of strong social and emotional skills, and meaningful career

trajectories. Communicators can simultaneously bring attention to the positive impacts for the *adults* involved in developmental relationships. Finally, the strategy highlights social or structural outcomes of positive developmental relationships, such as addressing inequity.

The recommendations below offer concrete ways of executing the *Cultivating Connections* master frame. These recommendations should not be understood as isolated tactics, but rather as an interwoven strategy. In presenting the specific recommendations, we consistently return to the larger narrative. We do this so that communicators can see the underlying commonalities that tie the recommendations together and explain why they work. By understanding these common threads, communicators can more flexibly adapt and apply these recommendations.

### **Research Methods**

FrameWorks researchers designed a series of qualitative studies and quantitative experiments that tested the effectiveness of different frame elements in communicating about developmental relationships. The frame elements tested included explanatory metaphors, values, examples, and messengers.

Researchers conducted on-the-street interviews—the first of two qualitative methods to do initial testing of the ways that frames affect perception and behavior. After asking participants a series of questions similar to those used in cultural models interviews, researchers observed how exposure to framed messages affected participants’ talk about developmental relationships. By exploring how participants picked up on and used the language of particular messages—in this case metaphors—and analyzing changes in talk, researchers were able to differentiate between more and less effective frames.

The survey experiments quantitatively tested a variety of frames using a large, nationally representative sample. To test frames in this experiment, researchers created a short description of a fictional policy initiative (see Appendix for language of the Act), which was given to participants in a control condition. Researchers then embedded frames into this description, which were given to “treatment” groups. Participants in the experiment were randomly assigned to the control or to a message treatment group and were asked to complete a survey probing their knowledge, attitudes, and policy preferences about issues related to developmental relationships. In the experiment, a frame “works” when it leads to positive shifts on these outcomes. Sample survey questions are provided in Table 1.

Researchers compared survey answers from the control and treatment groups to determine how frames affect thinking. In the analysis, researchers controlled for a range of demographic variables (including age, race, class, and gender of participants) by conducting a multiple

regression analysis to assure that the effects observed were driven by the frames rather than demographic variations in the sample. A breakdown of the sample by demographics is included in the Appendix.

**Table 1: Desired Communications Outcomes: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Policy Preferences**

SCALES	SAMPLE QUESTIONS								
Attitudes towards Act	How willing would you be to pay more in taxes to support the Act? ( <i>Extremely unwilling; Unwilling; Slightly willing; Neither willing nor unwilling; Slightly willing; Willing; Extremely willing</i> )								
Specific policy support	How much do you favor or oppose requiring social systems like child welfare, health care, juvenile justice, and workforce development to make changes in order to better promote positive relationships between adults and young people? ( <i>Strongly oppose; Oppose; Somewhat oppose; Neither favor nor oppose; Somewhat favor; Favor; Strongly Favor</i> )								
Understanding of the effects of policies	How much of an effect, if any, do you think the Act would have on the following outcomes? ( <i>No effect; a small effect; a moderate effect; a large effect; a very large effect.</i> ) <table border="0" style="width: 100%; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">1. Young people's learning and academic achievement</td> <td style="width: 50%;">4. Adults' social and emotional wellbeing</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. Young people's social and emotional wellbeing</td> <td>5. Rates of workforce participation</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3. Rates of civic participation</td> <td>6. Crime rates</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>7. Economic growth</td> </tr> </table>	1. Young people's learning and academic achievement	4. Adults' social and emotional wellbeing	2. Young people's social and emotional wellbeing	5. Rates of workforce participation	3. Rates of civic participation	6. Crime rates		7. Economic growth
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2. Young people's social and emotional wellbeing	5. Rates of workforce participation								
3. Rates of civic participation	6. Crime rates								
	7. Economic growth								
Understanding of whom developmental relationships are with	Please indicate how likely you think coaches are to form a developmental relationship with a young person. ( <i>Not at all likely; Slightly likely; Moderately likely; Very likely; Extremely likely</i> )								
Understanding of developmental relationships	Indicate what type of effect you think it would have on a young person if the adult listens to the young person and takes him or her seriously. ( <i>Large negative effect; Moderate negative effect; Small negative effect; No effect; Small positive effect; Moderate positive effect; Large positive effect</i> )								
Role of systemic and environmental factors	Please rank the following in terms of how big of an effect you believe they have on whether or not developmental relationships form between adults and young people: <i>How much the adults in a young person's life care; Whether the young person comes from a two-parent household; The young person's attitude; The presence or absence of youth-serving organizations and programs; The economic circumstances of the young person; The presence or absence of racial discrimination in the community; Education policies; The school environment.</i>								
Relationships across difference	Young people can form strong relationships with adults even if they don't share the same cultural background. ( <i>Strongly disagree; Disagree; Slightly disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Slightly agree; Agree; Strongly agree</i> )								
Collective efficacy	In your view, how realistic is it that all adults can engage in developmental relationships? ( <i>Not at all realistic; Slightly realistic; Somewhat realistic; Moderately realistic; Very realistic</i> )								

After the first wave of the survey experiment was conducted, researchers used the second qualitative method—persistence trials—to further refine frames. This research reconfirmed how exposure to framed messages about developmental relationships affected participants' understanding. Conducting qualitative research at this stage of the process allowed researchers to identify the specific features of the tested metaphor that were most productive and further refine the research recommendations. A fuller description of the persistence trials can be found in the Appendix.

## RECOMMENDATION #1: USE THE NAME “DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS”

While framing is more than renaming, labels do matter. An effective name should prime people to think about key aspects of developmental relationships: for example, that they are important and that they promote growth and development. The name should also open space for a broader and more diversified understanding of the outcomes of developmental relationships.

In order to test which term best encapsulated the concept of developmental relationships, FrameWorks researchers conducted a naming experiment comparing the term “developmental relationships” to other terms. Participants in different treatment groups were exposed to different names, and then asked to answer a set of questions that rated how important, realistic, feasible, and impactful developmental relationships are.

**Figure 1**

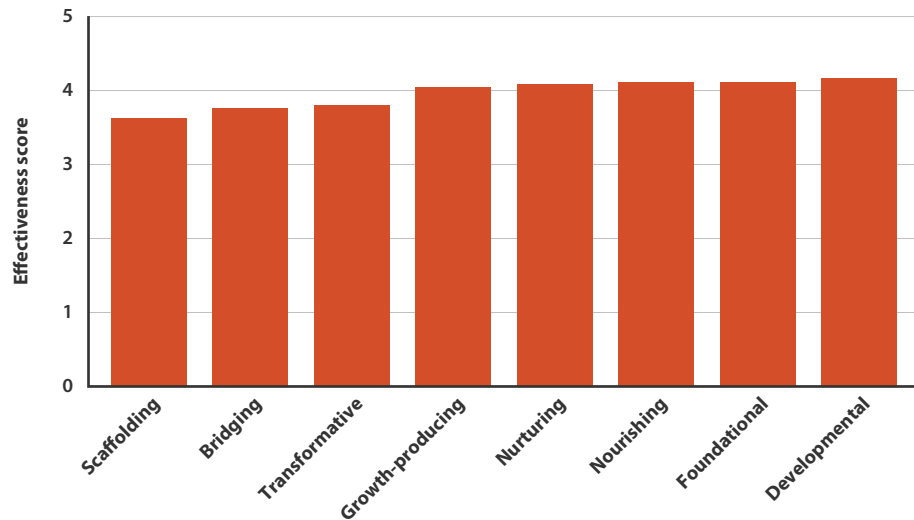


Figure 1 shows that the term “developmental relationships” had the highest effectiveness score, meaning that participants who read this term were more likely to rate these relationships as important, impactful, realistic, and feasible. The differences between the effectiveness scores of “developmental relationships” and the three lowest-performing names—“Scaffolding relationships,” “Bridging relationships,” and “transformative relationships”—were all statistically significant.

While we do not have direct data to explain why the term “developmental relationships” was effective, the earlier in-depth qualitative interviews offer some insights. It seems likely that the name “developmental relationships” performs well because it gestures toward the effect of these relationships—positive development—without setting too high of a bar and seeming too difficult to achieve. We suspect that “scaffolding” and “bridging” do not perform well because they are not intuitive enough; in other words, they do not clearly communicate the purpose of these

relationships. We suspect that “transformative” performs poorly largely because, in describing the purpose of these relationships in such powerful terms, it makes them seem difficult to form and sustain and thus not realistic or feasible to promote. For these reasons, experts and advocates should stick to the term “developmental relationships.”

## **RECOMMENDATION #2: USE THE VALUE *INCLUSIVE OPPORTUNITY* TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR PROGRAMS AND POLICIES**

Opportunities to establish developmental relationships are not available or accessible to all children and youth. In order to communicate this idea in a productive way, people need to understand *why* there is differential access to developmental relationships between groups—how typical educational practices and youth development opportunities exclude low-income families, families of color, non-English-speaking families, and others. Helping people see the structural rather than personal factors that produce inequities in developmental relationships creates space, then, for explaining how truly inclusive practices that enable the establishment of developmental relationships will result in positive outcomes for everyone involved.

The value of *Inclusive Opportunity* can powerfully orient audiences to the idea that practices and policies that promote developmental relationships should be available to all. It helps explain that developmental relationships strengthen healthy development and student achievement for all young people and also points to the sources of exclusion from developmental relationships for specific groups. Here is the core idea of the value:

*All young people should have what they need to create and sustain developmental relationships with the adults in their life, regardless of the color of their skin, how much money their family has, their gender or sexual orientation, or the language they speak at home. Some young people experience exclusion as a result of discrimination and strong and supportive relationships can help young people cope with and combat discrimination. An equitable and inclusive society makes sure that all young people have strong relationships and—in particular—that young people experiencing exclusion and discrimination have positive support.*

FrameWorks tested a number of different values in a large-scale survey experiment. Of all of these, *Opportunity for All* and *Inclusion* proved the most effective in shifting how people think about developmental relationships. The results indicate that *Opportunity for All* and *Inclusion* work well in isolation, but together they create a more powerful frame. (See Appendix for the wording of each of the values tested in the survey experiment.)

**Figure 2**

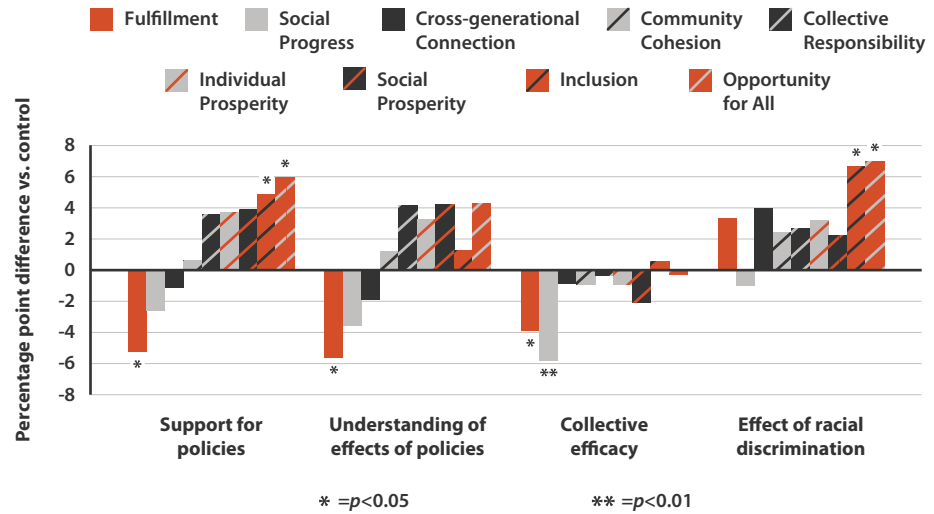


Figure 2 shows that the *Opportunity for All* and *Inclusion* messages are effective ways of framing the importance of developmental relationships. Compared to people in the control group who read unframed information about policies that promote developmental relationships, people who read the same information within a message framed by the value of *Opportunity for All* or *Inclusion* expressed higher levels of support for those policies. In addition, both of these values increased people’s understanding that the presence or absence of racial discrimination can affect whether or not developmental relationships form. By contrast, the values of *Fulfillment* and *Social Progress* actually had a backfire effect, which is described in more detail below. There were no statistically significant differences in responses between the control group and those who read any of the other values-based messages tested.

The *Inclusion* value focuses on the sources of exclusion from developmental relationships that stem from racial and socioeconomic status, gender identity, and sexual orientation. It also explains why children and youth who have experienced discrimination have the most need for strong developmental relationships. This framing move is likely effective because it counters the assumption that disparities in developmental relationships flow from deficits in families or communities and trains attention on the structural barriers to relationship formation. In addition, by explaining children and youth’s differential needs in regards to developmental relationships, the value brings attention to the multiple kinds of relationships with various adults that children and youth need.

The *Opportunity for All* value also focuses on sources of exclusion from developmental relationships for specific groups of children and young people, but also foregrounds the *inclusive practices* that facilitate the formation of developmental relationships. Instead of focusing on differential needs, the value points to policies and practices that will make strong developmental relationships available for all. There are likely reasons that this value worked so well. The value’s focus on policies and practices disrupts the public’s dominant idea that relationships

depend on how much the adult in the interaction cares about the young person. Instead, it redirects attention to the policy environment as a determining factor in relationship formation.

Because of the strengths of both values, we recommend that communicators use the combined *Inclusive Opportunity* value. When using the *Inclusive Opportunity* value, communicators should be sure to emphasize the following points:

- *Demonstrate how inclusive policies facilitate developmental relationships.* Communicators should use the value to signal how environments can be set up to ensure that all children and young people have access to developmental relationships.
- *Explain how identity and background affect access to developmental relationships.* Give audiences a clear sense of how children's and youths' backgrounds determine access to developmental relationships. For example, it may be difficult for non- or new English speakers to interact with adults who do not share the same language capacity.
- *Focus on the structural sources of exclusion from developmental relationships.* It is critical that communicators focus less attention on interpersonal factors that may disrupt developmental relationships and instead emphasize structural barriers.

### **RECOMMENDATION #3: DON'T FRAME DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS IN TERMS OF PERSONAL FULFILLMENT OR SOCIAL PROGRESS**

As noted above, the values of *Fulfillment* and *Social Progress* both backfire. These values undermine support for policy change, either by actually decreasing support for policies to promote developmental relationships or by depressing people's sense of collective efficacy—their sense that we, as a society, can take steps to effectively foster developmental relationships for young people.

As Figure 2 above shows, *Fulfillment* was particularly counterproductive, generating statistically significant *decreases* in support for tested policies, in understanding of the effects of these policies, and in collective efficacy.<sup>2</sup> However, this value decreased collective efficacy by almost 6 percentage points—a result that is *highly* significant, indicating a clear backfire effect. This evidence clearly indicates that these values are not simply ineffective, but actively counterproductive, pushing opinions and attitudes in the wrong direction.

Why do these two values actively undermine collective action to promote developmental relationships? While the experimental evidence does not provide a clear answer, findings from earlier in-depth qualitative interviews give us clues about why these values backfire.

*Fulfillment* makes the case that society should promote developmental relationships because these are sources of fulfillment and meaning for both adults and youth. It is likely that this argument activates individualistic ways of thinking about relationships. People tend to think of relationships as something that can only stem from an individual *caring* enough to build a connection with another person. It is likely that, in focusing on individual fulfillment, this value cues the *personal* quality of relationships. In doing so, the value makes it harder for people to see relationships as a matter of collective concern or to understand how systemic measures can promote them.

*Social Progress* argues that when young people lack the strong and supportive relationships they need to fully develop their talents and capacities, our society misses out on their potential contributions. This value likely backfires because it makes the most purely instrumental case of all the values tested, treating relationships with youth as simple means to social ends. This argument conflicts with the widespread assumption that relationships are about—and should be about—caring, not utility. The negative effects on collective efficacy likely reflect *rejection* of the argument. In other words, it triggers active pushback: society cannot and should not try to churn out relationships.

Other values tested, including both *Individual Prosperity* and *Social Prosperity* are, at base, instrumental arguments. However, the tested messages did not treat young people as important *solely* because of their social utility. *Individual Prosperity* placed young people's success as the goal, while the *Social Prosperity* message explained the importance of preparing youth to become positive contributors to our society and our economy—a description that imbues young people with status and respect.

The negative effects of the *Fulfillment* and *Social Progress* values suggest that individualistic and overly instrumental arguments can be actively counterproductive. Furthermore, the results demonstrated in Figure 2 speak to the power of framing. There is more than an 11-percentage-point difference between *Opportunity for All* and *Fulfillment* on policy support. By choosing the former frame instead of the latter, advocates and experts can build support for their agenda rather than inadvertently shoot themselves in the foot.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #4: EXPLAIN RELATIONSHIPS AS THE ROOTS OF SUCCESS TO BUILD UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THEY CAN BE CULTIVATED**

Communicators need ways of framing developmental relationships that help people recognize that relationships involve more than caring, that relationships can happen with many different types of people and in many different spaces, and that these contexts fundamentally influence relationship formation. The *Roots of Success* explanatory metaphor helps people understand that young people can have developmental relationships with many different people in many different



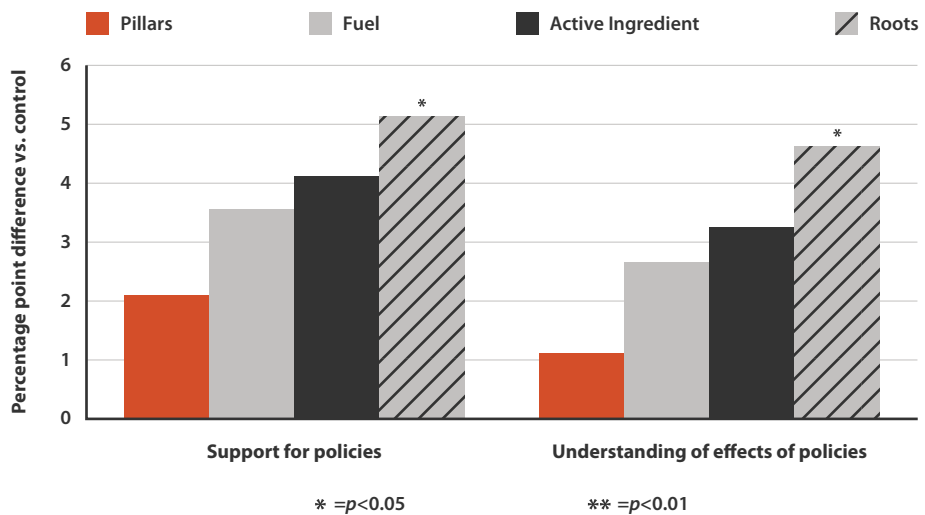
spaces, and that these environments, if structured properly, can actively support these relationships. Here’s an illustration of how the metaphor can be used to explain developmental relationships:

*Developmental relationships are like roots that support young people’s success. Roots support and nourish trees as they develop and grow just like positive relationships with adults nourish young people’s development by offering them guidance, encouragement, and new opportunities. Strong roots cultivate children’s and young people’s ability to accomplish their goals.*

FrameWorks tested a number of different metaphors in both on-the-street interviews and in a large-scale survey experiment. Of all of these, *Roots* proved the most effective in shifting how people think about developmental relationships.

In the survey experiment, the *Roots* metaphor was the only explanatory metaphor to produce statistically significant effects. In comparison with the control group, participants who received the *Roots* metaphor expressed greater support for policies and showed greater understanding of the effects of these policies on young people and society.

**Figure 3**



Analyses of on-the-street interviews and persistence trials (see Appendix for full description of the methods used in this research) helps us understand why the metaphor is so effective. In both of these qualitative methods, the metaphor enabled people to reason more productively about developmental relationships and influences on them.

The source domain of *Roots* is incredibly rich and flexible. Language from the metaphor—terms like “nourishment,” “growth,” “nurturing,” “grounded in,” and “flourishing”—stuck in participants’ minds, and they easily used the metaphor to talk about relationships and development. Participants immediately grasped the relationship between “growth” and development, which enabled people to understand how relationships foster positive development. The strong association

between roots and stability strengthened the sense that relationships support and make development possible. Participants were also able to think through the bi-directionality of developmental relationships by comparing it to how leaves and roots interact to create further growth. In addition, the metaphor helped people recognize that relationships during youth have lasting benefits—that the flourishing they enable during a person's youth results in healthy growth later in life.

In addition, the idea that plants need multiple roots helped people think about the roles of non-familial relationships in supporting development. Qualitative research found that when participants compared roots and relationships, they were able to think about young people's need for multiple relationships. Drawing on the entailments of the metaphor, people explained that just as plants need multiple roots, young people need multiple positive relationships. The metaphor thus enabled people to expand their thinking beyond familial relationships.

Participants also used the metaphor to explain how external environments foster relationships. The comparison of social contexts to features in a natural environment—including water, sun, and soil—brought into view the role of contexts and communities in making it possible for relationships to grow and for young people to develop. This aspect of the metaphor most directly explains its effects in the survey experiment. By helping people see how settings or contexts can alternatively cultivate or stunt relationship development, the metaphor helps people understand how policies create fertile settings, which leads to greater support of these policies.

In facilitated conversations at the end of the persistence trial sessions researchers further explored whether the metaphor could be used to help people understand the five elements of developmental relationships. We found that people could use the metaphor to talk about these elements. For example, people analogized expressing care to nourishment or nutrition, and compared providing support to the stability that roots provide for trees. This is another illustration of the richness of the metaphor and its ability to speak to different dimensions of relationships, their effects, and influences on them.

It is important to note that other metaphors tested were not as effective. The comparison with the *Active Ingredient* metaphor is illuminating. While that metaphor showed some promise in on-the-street interviews, it creates the impression that relationships are something that can be added or subtracted from young people's lives, rather than a foundational component that grounds development itself. The *Roots of Success* metaphor communicates the primacy of relationships—their role in anchoring development—in a way that other metaphors tested, including the *Active Ingredient* metaphor, do not.

Qualitative testing also pointed to more specific recommendations that amplify its potential to shift understanding and support:

- *Emphasize how strong roots create stability.*
- *Talk about the importance of multiple roots to broaden people’s understanding of the types of developmental relationships.* Communicators should name and point to other adults beyond parents or teachers that can form strong developmental relationships with children and young people.
- *Highlight environmental factors including water, soil, and air to bring attention to policies and practices that support developmental relationships.* Communicators should consistently name external factors that can either facilitate or hinder developmental relationships.
- *Show how strong roots cultivate various types of outcomes.* Communicators should use the broad domain of growth to point to the varied outcomes that strong developmental relationships produce.

### **RECOMMENDATION #5: ALWAYS TALK ABOUT THE ELEMENTS OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN AN EFFECTIVE FRAME**

As we discuss above, the *Roots of Success* metaphor provides an effective way of talking about the five features of relationships. Simply describing the five elements, by contrast, is ineffective.

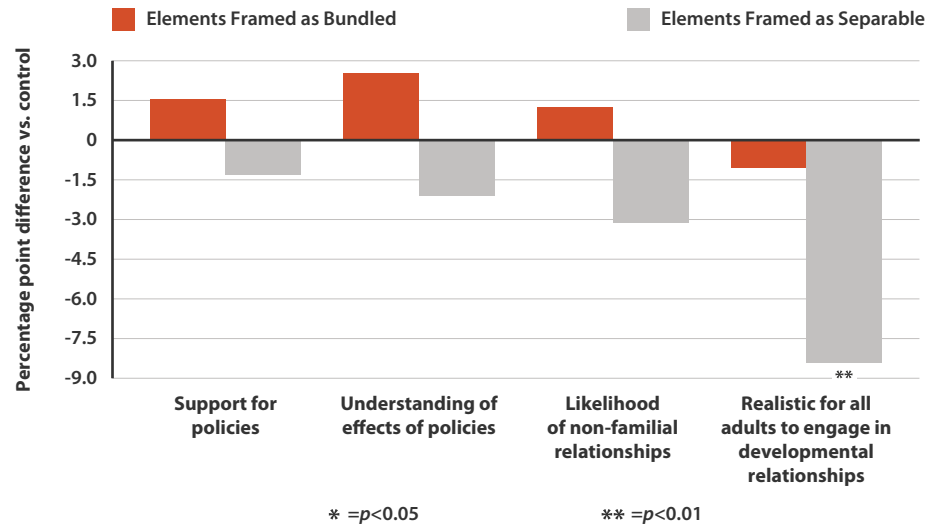
In the survey experiment, we tested two descriptions of the five elements. The first message simply defined developmental relationships, stated their importance for development, and then listed them (the “Elements Framed as Bundled” message). The second message included these same features but stressed their separability and emphasized that young people can experience different features in different relationships (e.g., being challenged and expanding possibilities with a coach or teacher but experiencing mutual support and shared power with a mentor). As Figure 4 below shows, both descriptions were ineffective. Simply describing the five elements—either as elements of singular relationships or as separable elements of different relationships—did not shift thinking in productive directions on *any* of the outcomes tested, including the outcomes depicted in the graph.

This finding leads to a critical recommendation: When conveying information about the nature of developmental relationships, communicators should always do so *within* an effective frame. In other words, the information should not be mistaken *for* the frame, but must always be packaged within a frame that helps people make sense of this information. As noted above, the *Roots of Success* metaphor is particularly well-designed to serve such a purpose.

While neither description proved effective to a statistically significant degree, it is important to note that emphasizing the separability of the elements of developmental relationships is counterproductive. It performed worse than the bundled description to a statistically significant degree on three outcomes—understanding the effects of policies, likelihood of forming non-familial relationships, and a single item on how realistic it is for *all* adults to engage

in developmental relationships. In other words, emphasizing the separability of the elements leads people to think that relevant policies have a smaller effect, that non-familial developmental relationships are rarer, and that it is less realistic for adults to engage in developmental relationships.<sup>3</sup> The bundled description did not have these counterproductive effects.

**Figure 4**



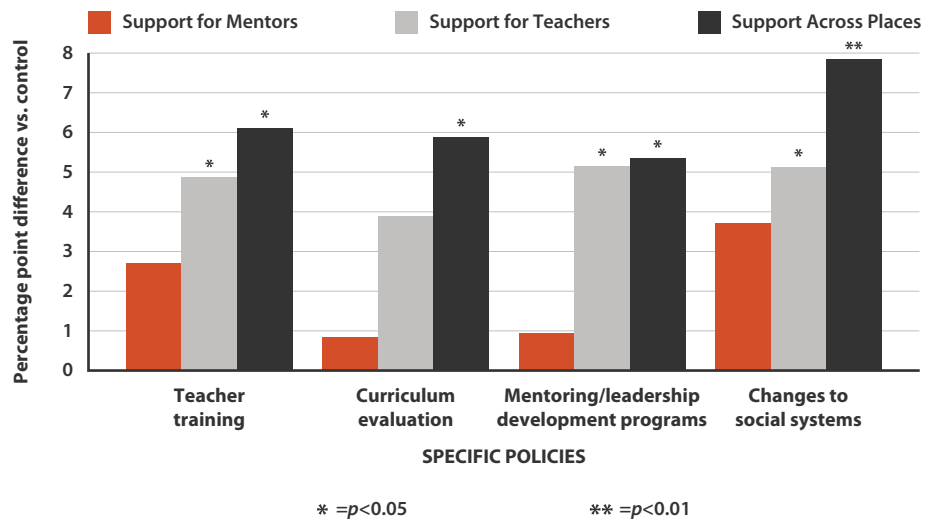
The message that emphasized the separability of elements was intended to make developmental relationships seem more achievable. If each of these elements does not have to be a part of all developmental relationships, then they should seem more feasible. The results suggest that participants interpreted this message in the opposite way. They understood it to imply that young people need *many* different meaningful relationships (with coaches, mentors, teachers, etc.), which likely seemed unrealistic and led participants to focus on the difficulty of forming these relationships. Thus, in the survey experiment they responded that developmental relationships were unlikely to occur and that policies would be ineffectual in promoting them. While this interpretation is somewhat speculative, the results of the experiment clearly indicate that emphasizing the separability of the elements of developmental relationships is counterproductive. (See the Appendix for the wording of these two messages.)

## RECOMMENDATION #6: EXPLAIN THE LINK BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS

Communicators need a range of tools or tactics to bring institutional context into view. While the *Roots of Success* metaphor provides one critical way to accomplish this, communicators need other strategies to drive home the importance of context and build understanding of its role.

Messages that show how school environments can facilitate or impede relationship building, and messages that explain how context matters can build support for policy and systems-level change, as Figure 5 illustrates.

**Figure 5**



This graph illustrates the effects of different explanation of the effects of context on relationship building. The *Support for Mentors* condition explained how community-level factors shape relationship building in mentorship programs. The *Support for Teachers* conditions explained how school environments either prioritize or impede relationship building. Finally, the *Support Across Places* condition demonstrated how place shapes relationships in multiple contexts.

As Figure 5 shows, both the *Support for Teachers* message and *Support Across Places* were highly effective. Both of these messages boosted support for increased teacher training related to relationship building, mentorship and leadership programs, as well as changes to social systems to better support developmental relationships. In addition, the *Support for Teachers* condition also increased support for evaluating curriculums to assess whether relationship building is prioritized. The *Supports for Mentors* condition did not have the same effects.

Why does the *Support for Teachers* and *Support Across Places* frames work so well and the *Support for Mentors* does not? While we do not have direct evidence that speaks to this, the *Support for Teachers* and *Support Across Places* frames either describe or name relationships that people already understand as central to children and young people's development and growth. With the understanding already in place that these are relationships that should be prioritized, it is easier for people to see why institutional supports for these relationships are necessary. And although the *Support Across Places* names teachers along with other adults that form developmental relationships with young people, it is easier for people to see how the institutional constraints and opportunities that teachers face might be emblematic of similar challenges and opportunities in other places.

In contrast, mentors are perceived as peripheral to children and young people's development and therefore prioritizing institutional supports for these actors is likely a bridge too far for many people. While people certainly recognize that relationships with mentors can be meaningful, people do not automatically think of mentors when they think about the key people in youth's lives. This makes it harder for them to generalize from this explanation to other places. But because mentors are not as central to people's thinking, explanations of the conditions that affect mentorship are harder to generalize from.

This finding suggests that when talking about how institutional contexts facilitate or impede developmental relationships, communicators should focus on or refer to non-familial adults that people already see as central to children and young people's development, like teachers. This finding is further supported by a recent survey experiment on family, school, and community engagement that also demonstrated that explaining the impacts of engagement on schools and teachers was a highly effective framing strategy.<sup>4</sup> The strategic use of messengers becomes an important tool when communicators want to focus on adults that are not easily or automatically linked with youth development, as described in more detail below. (See the Appendix for the wording of these two messages.)

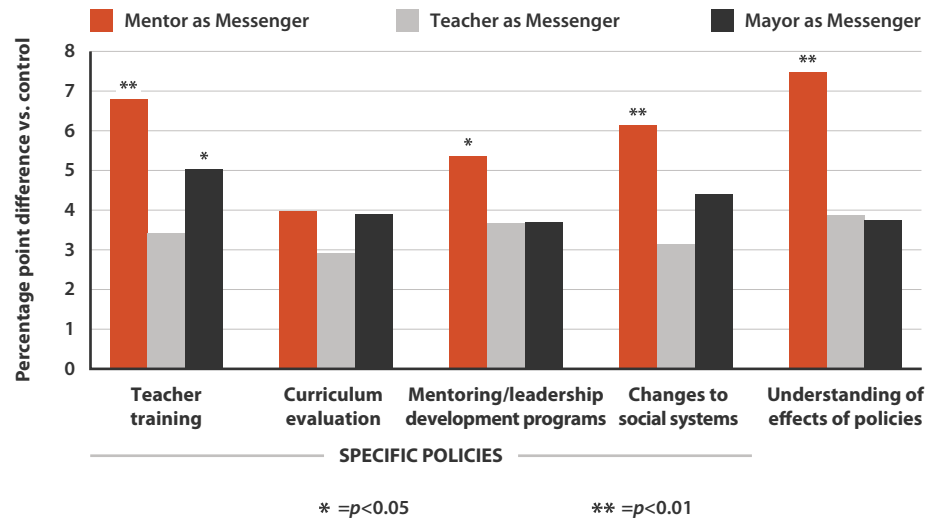
### **RECOMMENDATION #7: TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MESSENGERS WHO STRETCH PEOPLE'S ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE KEY PLAYERS IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES**

When communicators want to focus on adults that people *do not* easily or automatically see as central to young people's development, messengers become a critical frame element. Messengers who stretch people's assumptions about *who* plays a key role in young people's lives can help to broaden people's understanding of how relationships can be most effectively promoted. While we found that when messages discuss the need for supports for mentors without a messenger, they were ineffective (see above), when mentors are included in messages as *messengers*, they are *highly* effective, as Figure 6 illustrates. More generally, this indicates that

when communicators want to talk about adults other than parents and teachers, including them in messages as messengers can help broaden people’s ideas about key players in young people’s lives.

Figure 6 illustrates the effects of messages that paired the institutional explanations discussed under recommendation #6 above with relevant messengers. These messengers were included in the experiment because they are three types of actors who are well-positioned to talk about developmental relationships. In the *Mentor as Messenger* condition, the *Support for Mentors* explanation about how institutions can either impede or facilitate relationship development was adapted so that it was voiced by a mentor who referred to personal experience in providing this explanation. The *Teacher as Messenger* condition similarly put the *Support for Teachers* explanation in the mouth of a teacher. The *Mayor as Messenger* condition attributed the *Support Across Places* explanation to a mayor who spoke from the experience of putting necessary policy changes in place.

**Figure 6**



As Figure 6 shows, using mentors to communicate the *Support for Mentors* message is highly effective. It is important to note that, without this messenger, the explanation is not effective (see Figure 5). Including a mentor as messenger, however, boosts support for a range of specific policies—requiring teacher and staff training in relationship building, support for mentor and leadership development programs in youth-serving organizations, and requiring social systems like child welfare, health care, juvenile justice, and workforce development to make changes in order to better promote positive relationships. The *Mentor as Messenger* condition also produced a large increase in understanding of the benefits of these policies. In contrast, the *Teacher* and *Mayor* messenger conditions are less effective.

Why does an explanation about mentorship only work with a messenger who can speak from experience, while explanations about teaching and policies across places do not require a messenger to be effective? We strongly suspect that this

difference results from the fact that mentors are relatively peripheral to people's thinking about young people's relationships. However, once the mentor is brought in as a messenger, the explanation takes on new credibility and helps people see how institutions can foster relationships *even in spaces that people don't immediately think about* when thinking about key players. In other words, the mentor strengthens the credibility of the message and, in making this explanation of mentorship plausible, stretches people's understanding of where relationships can happen and how they can be promoted. Teachers and mayors are not ineffective messengers, but they are not needed to make their respective explanations credible and thus do not add significant value.

This finding suggests that other messengers who are similarly peripheral to people's default understanding about key players in young people's lives may also be effective. For example, religious leaders, leaders of extracurricular activities, or other community members outside of home or school are likely to stretch assumptions in important ways. To the extent possible, they should be enlisted as messengers when communicating about the spaces they inhabit.



# Conclusion

Experts and advocates who are working to ensure that children and youth have access to developmental relationships have many things in their favor when they are talking to members of the public about their issue. They do not have to communicate the importance of their issue, a luxury that not all social issue advocates share. The issue is also not abstract or hard for people to connect with—all people have experienced relationships and have an intuitive sense of what they are and how they work.

Yet, people's familiarity with relationships in some ways makes the framing challenge even greater. How do you change public thinking about something they already intimately know? This is a major challenge—one that required two years' worth of research to understand and overcome. While people already understand certain aspects of developmental relationships, their thinking is consistently narrow rather than broad, focusing on some aspects of relationships while missing the bigger picture.

The strategy presented in this report offers communicators a way of bringing the variety and multiplicity of developmental relationships into view along several dimensions—what they are, who is involved in them, where they can happen, how and when they can happen, and why they are so critical. By employing this *Cultivating Connections* strategy, communicators can stretch people's thinking and push them to imagine new possibilities about relationship development between young people and adults.

Experts and advocates find themselves at a unique moment of opportunity. As the research community has come to greater consensus about how developmental relationships work to promote positive development, the field is now ready to tell a unified story and foster a new public conversation about relationships. As the field works to change how our schools and communities deal with relationships, it needs buy-in and support from all of the stakeholders involved, and this requires framing the conversation in ways that enable people to recognize that relationships should be a matter of collective concern and that they require systemic support. Our success in promoting relationships requires that we are having the right kind of conversation.

We firmly believe that—equipped with this reframing research—committed experts and advocates in this field can, over time, shift how our society approaches relationships with young people. We offer this work as an important asset in the movement toward this goal.

# Appendix: Survey Experiments

To determine the effects of different frames, FrameWorks conducted two online survey experiments between January and April 2019, which were completed by a total of 6,254 respondents. Each survey experiment was completed by individuals age 18 and above with an IP address based in the United States. The sample was also recruited to match national U.S. demographics for sex, race and ethnicity, income, education, age, and political party identification. The tables below provide the sample demographics of each survey experiment.

**Table A1: Sample Demographics of Wave 1 Survey Experiment**

DEMOGRAPHIC	% OF EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE (TOTAL N=4,003)	% OF U.S. POPULATION
<b>Age (mean=48.8)</b>		
18–29	15.3	21.0
30–44	26.0	26.0
45–59	30.0	27.0
60+	28.7	26.0
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	46.9	49.2
Male	53.1	50.8
<b>Annual household income</b>		
\$0–\$24,999	19.3	23.2
\$25,000–\$49,999	24.6	23.7
\$50,000–\$99,999	34.1	30.0
\$100,000–\$149,999	13.9	13.0
\$150,000 and above	8.1	10.0
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school diploma	11.6	13.6
High school diploma	23.9	28.1
Some college, or associate's degree	31.6	29.1
Bachelor's degree	20.9	18.3
Graduate or professional degree	12.0	11.0

DEMOGRAPHIC	% OF EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE (TOTAL N=4,003)	% OF U.S. POPULATION
<b>Race and ethnicity</b>		
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8	0.8
Asian	6.0	4.0
Black or African American	12.8	10.6
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2	0.1
Hispanic or Latinx	17.2	16.3
White, non-Hispanic or Latinx	59.6	60.6
Other race or ethnicity	3.4	7.6
<b>Political party identification</b>		
Democrat	49.2	46.0
Republican	36.5	37.7
Independent, or other party	14.4	16.3
<b>Parental or primary caregiver status</b>		
Parent or primary caregiver of any children under 18	27.3	30.0
Not a parent or primary caregiver of any children under 18	72.7	70.0

**Table A2: Sample Demographics of Wave 2 Survey Experiment**

DEMOGRAPHIC	% OF EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE (TOTAL N=2,251)	% OF U.S. POPULATION
<b>Age (mean=51.0)</b>		
18–29	15.1	21.0
30–44	25.4	26.0
45–59	30.4	27.0
60+	29.1	26.0
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	54.7	49.2
Male	45.3	50.8
<b>Annual household income</b>		
\$0–\$24,999	21.1	23.2
\$25,000–\$49,999	26.3	23.7
\$50,000–\$99,999	30.8	30.0
\$100,000–\$149,999	13.1	13.0
\$150,000 and above	8.8	10.0
<b>Education</b>		
Less than high school diploma	5.9	13.6
High school diploma	27.4	28.1
Some college, or associate's degree	34.4	29.1
Bachelor's degree	19.8	18.3
Graduate or professional degree	12.4	11.0

DEMOGRAPHIC	% OF EXPERIMENTAL SAMPLE (TOTAL N=2,251)	% OF U.S. POPULATION
<b>Race and ethnicity</b>		
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8	0.8
Asian	5.0	4.0
Black or African American	13.0	10.6
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.1	0.1
Hispanic or Latinx	17.9	16.3
White, non-Hispanic or Latinx	60.7	60.6
Other race or ethnicity	2.5	7.6
<b>Political party identification</b>		
Democrat	49.7	46.0
Republican	33.9	37.7
Independent, or other party	16.5	16.3
<b>Parental or primary caregiver status</b>		
Parent or primary caregiver of any children under 18	20.7	30.0
Not a parent or primary caregiver of any children under 18	79.3	70.0

In each survey, respondents were randomly assigned to a treatment or control condition. Those assigned to the control condition received descriptive information about a fictional legislative proposal (the “Relationships for Youth Act”), which included three specific policies intended to promote developmental relationships. Those assigned to treatment conditions received identical information about the same proposal, but framed in a particular way with a particular frame element, such as a metaphor or values-based argument. The name of the initiative for these respondents was also changed to enhance or strengthen the frame being tested.

The basic text of the Act read as follows:

*The Relationships for Youth Act would invest \$50 billion over 10 years to promote developmental relationships between adults and young people—relationships that support positive academic, social, and emotional growth. The Act would require school systems to train teachers and other staff in how to build relationships, as well as require schools to examine their curriculums and classrooms to determine how relationship-friendly they are. It would also fund mentoring and relationship-based leadership development programs in youth-serving organizations. In addition, the Act would require social systems like child welfare, health care, juvenile justice, and workforce development to make changes in order to better promote positive relationships between adults and young people.*

After reading their assigned message, all respondents were asked an identical series of questions measuring their knowledge, beliefs, and policy preferences relating to developmental relationships. With the exception of those measuring policy preferences, which came first for all respondents, the order of all questions was randomized for all respondents. When applicable, responses to multiple questions

were grouped and analyzed together as a single measure of the underlying attitude (e.g., policy support), which are referred to as batteries. The batteries are listed in Table A1, along with sample questions from each battery.

The first experiment tested 16 message treatments. We tested nine values-based messages (*Social Prosperity*; *Individual Prosperity*; *Community Cohesion*; *Cross-Generational Connection*; *Inclusion*; *Opportunity for All*; *Collective Responsibility*; *Social Progress*; and *Fulfillment*); four explanatory metaphors (*Pillars*; *Active Ingredient*; *Fuel*; and *Roots*); and two descriptions of developmental relationships (*Five Elements of Developmental Relationships as Group*; and *Five Elements of Developmental Relationships as Separable*). The second experiment tested eight message treatments: six messages explaining the need for support for developmental relationships (*Support for Teachers*; *Teacher as Messenger*; *Support for Mentors*; *Mentor as Messenger*; *Support across Places*; and *Mayor as Messenger*); and two metaphors (*Roots: Conditions for Growth*; and *Roots: Conditions for Growth and the Five Elements of Relationships*).

Multiple regression analysis was used to identify significant differences in responses to questions between the treatment groups and the control group. To help ensure that any observed effects were driven by the messages respondents received rather than demographic variation between the groups, all regressions controlled for the demographics mentioned above. A threshold of  $p < 0.05$  was used to determine whether treatments had any significant effects.

### On-the-street interviews

Frame design is followed by a set of on-the-street interviews to explore potential framing tools with members of the public. We conducted approximately 49 interviews, in several geographical locations across the U.S. We first asked participants to respond to open-ended questions about a target area—in this case developmental relationships. Participants were then presented with a candidate frame and asked questions that parallel the initial set to explore how the frame is able to restructure understanding, open up new ways of thinking and give people productive language to use in discussing developmental relationships.

### PERSISTENCE TRIALS

Persistence trials are based on established cognitive science techniques and allow FrameWorks to make evaluations of which explanatory metaphors and other frame elements are most easily understood by the public, allow the public to most productively use new information, have the best chance of seeping into the public discourse and have the least chance of breaking down and morphing unproductively from their original form during transmission. In conversational group settings, participants are asked to think about a particular explanatory metaphor or frame element, and are then asked to communicate with a third party about the issue. By measuring and comparing participants' acceptance

of and facility with different frame elements—as they try to explain and reason about an issue—FrameWorks researchers are able to judge how effectively these elements are likely to be absorbed and used once introduced to the wider public.

FrameWorks researchers conducted six rounds of persistence trials of the *Roots* metaphor with 36 members of the public in in Denver, CO, and Baltimore, MD in March of 2019.

## TESTED MESSAGES

### Values

#### Social Prosperity

We do too little to prepare young people to contribute to our society’s success when they grow up. Too many young people lack the strong and supportive relationships that prepare youth to become positive contributors to our society and our economy. If we want our society to thrive, we need to make sure that every young person has the supportive relationships they need to grow into contributing members of society. Young people need relationships with different adults to prepare them for adulthood—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others. To ensure that we have a prosperous society in the future, we need to prioritize relationship building in our schools and our communities.

#### Individual Prosperity

Young people in our society do not get the support they need to succeed when they grow up. Too many young people lack strong and supportive relationships that set them up to get good jobs and do well economically. If we want young people to thrive, we need to make sure that every young person has the supportive relationships they need to succeed when they become adults. Young people need relationships with different adults to prepare them for adulthood—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others. To ensure that young people can prosper when they grow up, we need to prioritize relationship-building in our schools and our communities.

#### Community Cohesion

Our society today lacks a sense of community and connection. This is, in part, because too many young people lack strong and supportive relationships, which leaves them disconnected and disaffected. Over time, this has undermined the connections between us and the spirit of community in our society. If we want to unite our society, we need to make sure that every young person has supportive relationships and strong social ties. In order to be tied to the community, young people need relationships with different adults—not only parents, but teachers,

coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others. We can strengthen the connections between us and invigorate the spirit of community in our country by prioritizing relationship building in our schools and our communities.

### **Cross-Generational Connections**

In our society today, the ties that bind the generations together have weakened. Too many young people lack strong and supportive relationships with different adults, and this cuts off younger people from the generations ahead of them. If we want to forge cross-generational ties, we need to make sure that every young person has supportive relationships with a wide range of adults in their lives. To connect with people of all ages, young people need relationships with all sorts of different adults—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others. We can strengthen connections between generations by prioritizing relationship building in our schools and our communities.

### **Inclusion**

In our society today, some young people experience exclusion as a result of the color of their skin, where their family is from, how much money they have, or their gender or sexual orientation. Strong and supportive relationships can help young people cope with and combat discrimination, yet frequently, the youth who are discriminated against the most have the least support. To build an equitable and inclusive society, we need to make sure that all young people have strong relationships and—in particular—that young people experiencing exclusion and discrimination have positive support. Young people need relationships with different adults to do well—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others. We can create an equitable society by prioritizing relationship building in *all* schools and communities and paying attention to the specific needs of excluded youth.

### **Opportunity for All**

In our society today, we do not provide equal opportunities for all young people. Some youth lack opportunities as a result of the color of their skin, where their family is from, how much money they have, or their gender or sexual orientation. In particular, while all young people need strong and supportive relationships to do well in life, only some of our youth get this support. If we want to make sure that *all* young people have the same chance to succeed, we need to make sure that every young person has supportive relationships. Young people need relationships with different adults to do well—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others. We can make sure that all young people have an equal opportunity to succeed by prioritizing relationship building in *all* schools and communities.

## Collective Responsibility

Our society isn't living up to its responsibility to make sure that all young people have the opportunity to reach their potential. Too many young people lack the strong and supportive relationships they need to fully develop their talents and capacities. We have a responsibility as a society to make sure that every young person has supportive relationships so they can reach their potential. Young people need relationships with different adults to develop their strengths—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others. We can meet our responsibility to give young people the support they need to thrive by prioritizing relationship building in our schools and our communities.

## Social Progress

Our society isn't doing enough to make sure that all young people have the opportunity to reach their potential, and this undermines our society's progress. Too many young people lack the strong and supportive relationships they need to fully develop their talents and capacities and, in turn, our society misses out on their potential contributions. In order for our society to achieve its potential, we need to make sure that every young person has supportive relationships so they can reach their potential. Young people need relationships with different adults to develop their strengths—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others. We can help young people thrive—and help our society move forward—by prioritizing relationship building in our schools and our communities.

## Fulfillment

We are all looking for sources of meaning and fulfillment in our lives. And the relationships we have are a major source of meaning. Yet many young people lack strong and supportive relationships. This is a missed opportunity both for them and for the adults in their lives to find meaning. When we foster relationships between young people and adults, this creates meaning and satisfaction for everyone involved. Young people need relationships with different adults—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others—and each of these relationships is a potential source of meaning and satisfaction. Prioritizing relationship building in our schools and our communities creates personal fulfillment and meaning for both young people and adults.

## Metaphors

### Pillars

Strong and supportive relationships are pillars of young people's success. When young people have relationships with a variety of adults who express care for them and challenge them to grow, this strengthens and reinforces young people's development by offering them guidance, encouragement, and new opportunities.



And just as a building needs multiple pillars to provide stability, young people need relationships with different adults to build sturdy lives—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others.

### Active Ingredient

Strong and supportive relationships are an active ingredient in young people's success. When young people have relationships with a variety of adults who express care for them and challenge them to grow, this activates young people's development by offering them guidance, encouragement, and new opportunities. Just as certain ingredients activate others and help a recipe come together, these kinds of relationships help young people bring the different parts of their lives together. And it's not just relationships with parents that can activate success, but also relationships with teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others.

### Fuel

Strong and supportive relationships are fuel for young people's success. When young people have relationships with a variety of adults who express care for them and challenge them to grow, this drives young people's development by offering them guidance, encouragement, and new opportunities. Just as fuel propels things forward, these kinds of relationships propel young people and help them progress. And it's not just relationships with parents that can fuel success, but also relationships with teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others.

### Roots

Young people's success is rooted in strong and supportive relationships. When young people have relationships with a variety of adults who express care for them and challenge them to grow, this nourishes young people's development by offering them guidance, encouragement, and new opportunities. And just as trees need multiple roots to sustain them and provide stability, young people need relationships with different adults to grow into strong and well-grounded adults—not only parents, but teachers, coaches, mentors, neighbors, extended family, and others.

### Descriptions

#### Five Elements of Developmental Relationships: Elements as Group

Developmental relationships have five core features. First, a young person and adult who have a developmental relationship **express care** for one another. Second, they **challenge** each other to grow. Third, they **support** one another, encouraging each other to reach goals and expectations, reflecting on failures together, and learning from their mistakes together. Fourth, in a developmental relationship,

a young person and adult **share power** through mutual respect, collaboration, and shared decision making. Fifth, developmental relationships **expand possibilities** for both the young person and the adult, as both parties develop new aspirations, ideas, and connections to others who can continue to support their growth.

### **Five Elements of Developmental Relationships: Elements as Separable**

Developmental relationships have five core features. Relationships can have all of these features, or they may only have one or some of these features. First, a young person and adult who have a developmental relationship **express care** for one another. Second, they **challenge** each other to grow. Third, they **support** one another, encouraging each other to reach goals and expectations, reflecting on failures together, and learning from their mistakes together. Fourth, in a developmental relationship, a young person and adult **share power** through mutual respect, collaboration, and shared decision making. Fifth, developmental relationships **expand possibilities** for both the young person and the adult, as both parties develop new aspirations, ideas, and connections to others who can continue to support their growth.

#### **Young people can experience different features in different relationships.**

For example, a young person may be challenged and expand possibilities in a relationship with a coach or teacher. That young person might, at the same time, experience mutual support and shared power with a mentor. And they might express care to, and receive care from, grandparents. The important thing is that young people experience all five features in some relationship.

## **Explanations of Contexts**

### **Communities and General Support**

We all know that young people need positive relationships. But there are things that get in the way of these relationships developing. In many communities—in particular, low-income communities—there simply aren't programs that connect adults and young people. And many of the adults in young people's lives don't have the time or the know-how to forge connections with them. Schools frequently prioritize things like standardized tests over relationship building, which leaves teachers with little time to forge connections with students. And schools and other social systems that work with young people frequently don't train staff in relationship building. As a result, even when adults working in these places can focus on relationships, they are sometimes unsure how best to connect with young people, especially with young people from other racial groups, or cultural or economic backgrounds different than their own.

The good news is that some cities and communities have started prioritizing relationship building. These places are creating mentoring programs in every neighborhood, changing school curriculums to give teachers more time to focus on relationships, creating spaces where adults and young people can

come together, and training adults who work closely with youth in relationship building. In these communities, adults have developed strong relationships with more young people, and this has made a difference in young people's and adults' lives. We need to follow these communities' example and do more, as a society, to make sure that all young people have positive relationships.

### **Schools and Teacher Support**

Teachers are generally enthusiastic about building positive relationships with their students. But there are things that get in the way and make this harder than it should be. Frequently, schools prioritize other concerns, like standardized tests, over relationship building. This pulls teachers' focus away from forging connections with students. And schools rarely train teachers in how to build relationships with young people. As a result, when teachers are able to focus on relationships, they are sometimes unsure how best to connect with students, especially with students from other racial groups or cultural or economic backgrounds different than their own.

The good news is that some school districts have started prioritizing relationship building. These school districts are changing curriculums to give teachers more time to focus on relationships. And they're providing training in relationship building so teachers are well-equipped to connect with students and confident in their ability to do so. In these school districts, teachers have developed strong relationships with more students, and this has made a difference in students' lives and teachers' work.

This is just one example of how we, as a society, can actively support relationship building between adults and young people. We all know young people's relationships have a major impact on their lives, and we need to do more to make sure that all young people have positive relationships.

### **Communities and Mentor Support**

There are many adults who would like to mentor young people and build positive relationships with them. But there are things that get in the way of mentoring and make this harder than it should be. In many communities—in particular, low-income communities—there simply aren't programs that connect adults and young people. Even when opportunities for mentoring exist, programs don't always include training in how to be a mentor. As a result, adults are sometimes unsure how best to connect with young people, especially with young people from other racial groups or cultural or economic backgrounds different than their own.

The good news is that some cities and communities have started prioritizing relationship building. These places are creating mentoring programs in every neighborhood—programs that provide training in relationship building so adults are well-equipped to connect with young people and confident in their ability to do so. In these places, adults in the community have developed strong relationships with more young people, and this has made a difference in young people's and adults' lives.

This is just one example of how we, as a society, can actively support relationship building between adults and young people. We all know young people's relationships have a major impact on their lives, and we need to do more to make sure that all young people have positive relationships.

## Messengers

### Teacher Messenger

I have taught middle school and high school for years, and I've always been enthusiastic about building positive relationships with my students. But there are things that can get in the way and make this harder than it should be. The schools I have worked in have generally prioritized other concerns, like standardized tests, over relationship building. This pulled my focus away from forging connections with my students. And the schools where I worked didn't train me in how to build relationships with young people. As a result, when I was able to focus on relationships, I was unsure where to start. As a white teacher from a middle-class background who teaches low-income Black and Latino students, I didn't really know how to connect with students across these racial, cultural, and economic differences.

Recently, my school district started prioritizing relationship building, which has given me the support I need to build relationships with students. My school district has changed the curriculum to give teachers more time to focus on relationships. And they've provided training in relationship building, which has made me better equipped to connect with students and confident in my ability to do so. I now have strong relationships with many more students, and I know this makes a difference in my students' lives and in my own work.

This experience has taught me that we, as a society, need to actively support relationship building between adults and young people—not just in schools, but everywhere. We all know young people's relationships have a major impact on their lives, and we need to do more to make sure that all young people have positive relationships.

### Mentor Messenger

As someone who cares about the youth in my community, I had wanted for years to be a mentor and build positive relationships with young people. But for a long time, there were things that got in the way and made it hard for me to become a mentor. Many of the communities in my area—especially the low-income communities in the area—simply didn't have programs that connect adults and young people, so I struggled to find opportunities near me. And when I found a mentoring program I could participate in, it didn't include training in how to be a mentor. As a result, in my first attempts at mentoring, I was unsure where to start. As a white person from a middle-class background mentoring low-income Black and Latino youth, I didn't really know how to connect with the young people I was working with across our racial, cultural, and economic differences.

Recently, my city started prioritizing relationship building, which has given me the support I need to be an effective mentor. My city has created a mentoring program in every neighborhood—programs that provide training in relationship building, which has made me better equipped to connect with young people and confident in my ability to do so. I now have strong relationships with a number of young people, and I know this makes a difference in their lives just as it does in mine.

This experience has taught me that we, as a society, need to actively support relationship building between adults and young people—not just in mentoring programs, but in all parts of life. We all know young people’s relationships have a major impact on their lives, and we need to do more to make sure that all young people have positive relationships.

### **Mayor Messenger**

When I was elected mayor, I knew how many adults in our city cared about the youth in our community. But I quickly learned, after starting my first term, that there were things getting in the way of relationships developing between adults and youth. In many parts of the city—in particular, low-income neighborhoods—there simply weren’t programs to connect adults and young people. And many of the adults in young people’s lives didn’t have the time or the know-how to forge connections with them. When I took office, our schools frequently prioritized things like standardized tests over relationship building, which left teachers with little time to forge connections with students. And the schools and other youth social systems I inherited frequently didn’t train staff in relationship building. As a result, even when adults working in these places could focus on relationships, they were sometimes unsure how best to connect with young people, especially with young people from other racial groups or cultural or economic backgrounds different than their own.

Recognizing these problems, I made changes to start prioritizing relationship building in our city. I created a mentoring program in every neighborhood in the city, changed school curriculums to give teachers more time to focus on relationships, created more spaces where adults and young people can come together, and trained adults who work closely with youth in relationship building. As a result of these changes, adults in our city have developed strong relationships with more young people, and this has made a difference in young people’s and adults’ lives.

As a mayor who has made these changes, I can speak to the impact of prioritizing relationships. My experience has taught me that we, as a society, need to do more to make sure that all young people have positive relationships.

# Endnotes

1. For more detail on the gaps and overlaps between expert and public perspectives on developmental relationships, see Pineau, M.G., Downs, L., & Volmert, A. (2018). *“They all play a role”: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of developmental relationships*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
2. While the effects of *Social Progress* on policy support and on understanding of the effects of policy were negative, these results were not statistically significant, so we cannot be certain that this value actually backfires on these outcomes, rather than just being ineffective.
3. It is worth noting that the negative effect on this last outcome—how realistic it is for all adults to engage in developmental relationships—was statistically significant relative not only to the bundled description but also to the control.
4. Volmert, D., O’Neil, M., Pineau, M.G., & Levay, K. (2019). *Strategies for Effectively Communicating about Family, School and Community Engagement*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

## ABOUT THE FRAMEWORKS INSTITUTE

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## **A message memo by the FrameWorks Institute**

**July 2019**

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