



DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Framework

Developmental relationships are the roots of thriving and resilience for young people, regardless of their background or circumstances. Through these relationships, young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. Just as trees rely on a system of roots to support and nourish them, young people need to experience developmental relationships in their families, schools, programs, and communities. However, too many young people miss these opportunities due to bias, prejudice, and systemic exclusion based on their race, ethnicity, income, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, or other differences. Ensuring that every young person experiences the developmental relationships they need is a vital challenge for the 21st century.

The Developmental Relationships Framework was developed by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN; 800-888-7828; www.searchinstitute.org.

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EXPRESS CARE

Show me that I matter to you.

Be dependable
Be someone I can trust

Be warm
Show me you enjoy being with me

Listen
Really pay attention when we are together

Encourage
Praise me for my efforts and achievements

Believe in me
Make me feel known and valued



CHALLENGE GROWTH

Push me to keep getting better.

Expect my best
Expect me to live up to my potential

Hold me accountable
Insist I take responsibility for my actions

Stretch
Push me to go further

Reflect on failures
Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks



PROVIDE SUPPORT

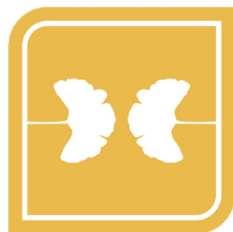
Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

Navigate
Guide me through hard situations and systems

Advocate
Stand up for me when I need it

Empower
Build my confidence to take charge of my life

Set boundaries
Put limits in place that keep me on track



SHARE POWER

Treat me with respect and give me a say.

Respect me
Take me seriously and treat me fairly

Collaborate
Work with me to solve problems and reach goals

Include me
Involve me in decisions that affect me

Let me lead
Create opportunities for me to take action and lead



EXPAND POSSIBILITIES

Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.

Inspire
Inspire me to see possibilities for my future

Connect
Introduce me to people who can help me grow

Broaden horizons
Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places

APPROACHES TO EXPRESSING CARE



We may care deeply about our students or youth, but they may not see or experience that care, particularly if we're not good at expressing it. Consider the following everyday actions—some that you likely already do—that communicate that you value each young person, and help young people come to know they can trust you. Which approaches do you see being most valuable and feasible for you and the young people you see regularly?

The Joke's On Me

School can be a tense and overwhelming place for many young people. When teachers are “too serious” or stern, it can demotivate students. One of the best ways to make them comfortable, students say, is when teachers can both “take a joke and make a joke about themselves.” Bringing humor into the classroom eases tension and builds trust, so students feel more like they can be themselves.

Source: A Search Institute longitudinal study of middle and high school teacher-student relationships

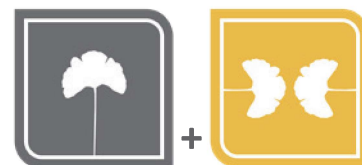
- 1. Learn names:** Learn names and how to pronounce them quickly and correctly soon after you meet young people. Politely correct others who mispronounce young people's names. It may seem like such a simple thing, but greeting young people by their name (correctly) can often make a big difference in helping them know that you care about them. This can be especially powerful and important for young people from cultural backgrounds that are different from yours.
- 2. Use correct pronouns:** Share your own pronouns when introducing yourself and encourage young people to share their pronouns as well. Use the pronouns young people use for themselves and politely correct others who misgender them. If you use name badges in your program, include pronouns on name tags. Use “they/them” as default pronouns rather than assuming someone else's pronouns.
- 3. Listen actively:** When a young person is talking, give them your undivided attention and demonstrate your interest in what they have to say through eye contact (unless you are in a culture where that is not appropriate), nodding, and asking clarifying questions. Young people notice when adults are only half listening while checking their phones. Revisit topics young people bring up to demonstrate that you remembered what they had to say. “Hey, didn't you have a game last weekend? How did it go?”
- 4. Share stories:** It may feel vulnerable to you, but youth love to hear about how you came to be the person you are today. Share information about your life (within appropriate boundaries, of course) and connect your experiences to what young people are going through today. This sense of shared experience can powerfully strengthen interpersonal connections.

5. **Build trust:** Unless you are concerned about a behavior that needs to be shared with another professional, keep what young people tell you in confidence. During Search Institute focus groups, young people have told us it breaks trust if they feel that “the adults talk about us behind our back” in a negative way. Be sure to follow through on the things you say you will do. If for some reason you can’t keep your promise, take time to explain why and, if appropriate, apologize.
6. **Check in:** Periodically ask young people how they are doing. Note if you see a marked difference in their behavior; “Hey, you seem a bit down today, do you want to talk?” If you learn that a young person is struggling with something during one of these check ins, be sure to proactively check in again with that young person to see how things are going.
7. **Offer advice carefully:** If a young person opens up to you about a challenge they are facing, give the young person a chance to describe what happened, tell you how they are feeling, or just vent before you offer advice or guidance. Ask if they would like your input on how to address the situation.
8. **Smile and laugh:** Use humor and model a positive attitude. Try not to be serious all of the time. Goof around with young people, and be willing to make fun of yourself. Young people appreciate when adults have a positive attitude and can have fun with them.
9. **Be a cheerleader:** Celebrate a young person’s success or accomplishments in the way they most appreciate. Some people prefer public recognition; others prefer private recognition or having their success shared with just a few close friends or family members. Let them know that you recognize effort and minor achievements, too.
10. **Show up:** Attend sporting events, concerts, presentations, graduations, and other activities that matter to young people. If you tell a young person you’ll be coming to an event, do all that you can to be there. Youth have told us this means a lot to them!

How’s It Going?

Some young people don’t “click” with a group right away. They may tend to spend more time on their own. For those running immersive or long-term programs, especially in environments that are new for youth, it’s important to keep young people safe and let them know you care, while respecting their desire for some space. A wilderness camp coordinator described checking in with campers “who may be the outliers from the group.” They noted, “It does require a balance of respect for their space and checking in with them,... being able to judge when you need to... say, ‘Hey, how’s it going?’ and, if they’re not too chatty, just let them be, if that’s how they’re comfortable.”

Source: A Search Institute case study of a middle-school wilderness leadership camp.



Blend Elements: Express Care & Share Power

Show care and mutual respect by owning your mistakes, and talking about them. As one young person explained about an adult they look up to, “I love how they share their mistakes, as well, so it’s like they understand. . . it makes me feel like they do understand the situation I’m going through.”

APPROACHES TO CHALLENGING GROWTH



Many young people will say teachers, leaders, parents, and others already Challenge Growth all the time. They may be experiencing healthy Challenge Growth, or they may be being pushed to do better for less-than-healthy reasons (like unhealthy competition for grades) or to make someone else happy. Here are some approaches to challenging growth that can elicit healthy motivation, growth, and learning.

Challenge By Choice

One peer program used challenging outdoor physical obstacles to grow relationships and teamwork. Their motto, “challenge by choice” made young people feel more comfortable when trying new obstacles. Leaders and peers alike were expected to try to “live up to their potential,” while knowing they could take a step back and assess their comfort level when needed. This was especially helpful on the obstacle called the “power pole” where young people needed to jump from the top of the pole to a hanging bar (in a harness, of course)!

Source: A national Search Institute study of exemplary peer programs.

- 1. Encourage appropriate autonomy:** Don’t just provide answers for young people when they can do it themselves; encourage them to figure it out on their own. Remind them that they are capable of doing challenging things.
- 2. Go beyond:** Encourage young people to move beyond their comfort zones to try things and go places that are unfamiliar and new.
- 3. Promote a growth mindset:** If a young person struggles to accomplish something or makes a mistake, talk through what went wrong together and help the young person think of concrete ways to improve in the future. Explain that mistakes are not evidence of limited abilities – they are invaluable opportunities from which to learn and grow. Share stories of mistakes and failures in your own life and what you learned from them.
- 4. Emphasize continuous improvement:** You don’t need to wait for struggle or failure to challenge growth. As one young person shared about an adult, “Even if I’m doing good in something, they’ll tell me, ‘If you think you can do better, go for it.’” Encourage young people to improve compared to their own past performance, rather than seeking to do better than other people.
- 5. Provide feedback:** If a young person is struggling to understand a concept or master a skill, help them break the task down into more specific steps and provide feedback on how well they implement those steps. During particularly challenging tasks, specific feedback allows the young person to correct errors while maintaining progress toward the goal.

- 6. Get personal:** When you need or want to ask a young person to try harder, make time for a one-to-one conversation or write a personal note. Let them know that you set high expectations for them because you believe they can meet those expectations. Be sure to notice and congratulate them for actions they take in response to your encouragement.
- 7. Use an equity lens:** Point out biases you may see in things you read, watch, or listen to with young people. Engage young people in conversations about how such biases are harmful, and talk about healthy ways to respond to and challenge bias. Be ready for young people to challenge your growth in this area as well! And if you notice bias in what young people say or do, challenge it while making sure the young people understand that you're challenging them from a place of care, not criticism. Ask, "What do you mean by that?" or "Tell me more about how you came to that conclusion" before correcting or re-focusing their ideas.
- 8. Develop critical thinking skills:** Expand young people's thinking by asking hard questions, providing alternate explanations, and encouraging openness to different opinions. For example, teach media literacy when reading information online by asking critical questions about a source or examining the language an article or headline uses. When young people talk about or spread rumors, misinformation, and conspiracy theories, push them to dig for accurate information, scientific research, and credible sources to clarify the issues. Encourage them to educate themselves on different perspectives about an issue.
- 9. Encourage future thinking:** Help young people imagine their future selves by asking them to think and talk about what they want their lives to be like in the future. In addition to asking about jobs they would like to have and their plans for education after high school, ask them what they hope their personal lives will be like, what interests they will have, and what causes they will care about.
- 10. Hold youth to their goals:** Sometimes young people need a caring reminder about what they intended to accomplish.

Call Me on It

Christian, Jewish, and Muslim youth said they felt challenged in positive ways by adults and peers who invited them to think about choices they faced through a lens of their faith or religion. One young person shared that they appreciated one of their friends because "...if she knows I'm doing something wrong, she's not afraid to call me out on it, which has definitely been helpful in my faith."

Source: A Search Institute study of developmental relationships and youth faith formation in Muslim, Jewish, and Christian congregations.



Blend Elements: Challenge Growth & Express Care

When young people don't experience a foundation of care, challenging growth alone can often feel frustrating and unmotivating. For example, a teacher shared that when a student's behavior was getting in the way of their learning, they said to them: "I love you and I want the best for you, therefore, what you're doing can't continue."

APPROACHES TO PROVIDING SUPPORT



Finding the right balance to Provide Support can sometimes be tricky. Some people offer to “help” and then “take over.” Or they don’t offer help, waiting to see if the person can do it by themselves, and that person ends up quitting completely out of utter discouragement. But when you get the balance right, they know they “did it,” and you know they can do it the next time, probably with less help from you.

Talk It Through

Young people appreciated when their mentors helped them think about tough situations they needed to navigate by talking it through together. As one mentor in our study said, “I’ve found that she responds really well when we’re open about problems she has. We talk about it, we internalize it, and we talk about the different aspects.” Youth also noted that it was useful when mentors shared how they navigated difficult situations: “They could tell you what you’re gonna expect, like what they’ve been through.”

Source: A Search Institute study of developmental relationships between mentors and mentees in a national mentoring program.

- 1. Scaffold support:** Try following the “I do, we do, you do” process to support youth learning something new. That process is: First, model it for them. Then do it together. Then, empower them to try on their own. (Bonus: Ask them to teach it to someone else.)
- 2. Provide or connect youth to resources:** Make sure all young people have the material things they need to be successful, whether it’s a snack, a pencil, or financial support. Think about ways you can directly provide resources to young people, or connect them with people or places where they can access the resources they need.
- 3. Remove internal roadblocks:** Help young people recognize and counteract ways that they might get in their own way when they feel frustrated, like negative self-talk, giving up, or shutting down. Help them find a new way to look at a difficult situation when they feel discouraged.
- 4. Keep eyes on the prize:** When a young person seems to get “off track” and isn’t reaching their goals, take time to talk to them and remind them of what they set out to achieve. Let them know you want to see them get back on track and know they can do it.
- 5. Validate feelings:** When young people are working hard on a task (especially - though not only - when they are struggling with it), ask them how they are feeling and validate or, if validation isn’t appropriate, acknowledge their feelings.

6. **Problem solve:** Talk through difficult situations or tasks with the young person. Help them identify what their options are, and what the consequences of different choices might be. Help them identify which aspects they can handle on their own and which aspects might require support from you or someone else.
7. **Prep for tough stuff:** Support a young person navigating a conflict by creating a strategy together for approaching a difficult conversation. Use role play to help them practice their strategy and what they want to say. Many young people need help learning how to ask for help.
8. **Keep an open door:** Proactively let young people know that they can come and talk to you whenever they want or need to talk.
9. **Advocate for equity:** Stand in solidarity with people experiencing prejudice and discrimination and invite others to do the same. When you notice a young person experiencing discrimination, let them know you see them. Speak up against the discrimination and make space for them to speak up as well - empower them by giving them choice in how you respond.
10. **Use indirect praise:** When a young person has made important progress on a difficult task or challenge, mention that progress to their family or other staff and invite them to join you in encouraging the young person to continue moving ahead.



**Blend Elements:
Provide Support & Share Power**

Providing support without sharing power can sometimes lead to an adult pushing their own agenda without listening to the voice of the young person. As one youth leader explained, “There’s a fine line between giving advice and telling people what to do.” A parent explained that when sharing power and providing support, “There’s just a balance of guiding and stepping back.”

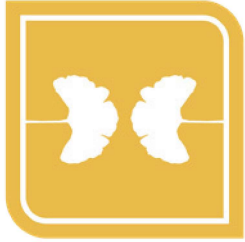
The balance between providing support and sharing power can lie in the ability of the adult to do this “dance” and become attuned to what the young person needs. As one young person shared, it’s “nice to know that the person that I’m asking for advice isn’t trying to tell me exactly what to do, but they’re helping and asking more, rather than saying, ‘You should, you should.’”

Basic Supports

Young people impacted by the child welfare system shared that they need to have their basic needs met in order to be well. One young person described this as being “healthy and without need.” For many young people in the child welfare system, support for basic needs includes financial stability, access to food, adequate housing, employment, and transportation. These supports are the groundwork for young people to engage in relationships and communities.

Source: A Search Institute study of how young people and parenting adults impacted by the child welfare system experience well-being.

APPROACHES TO SHARING POWER



Share Power is an element of developmental relationships that can feel uncomfortable at first. And yet when people find a balance that works for them in their relationships, they often find those relationships to be more enjoyable and productive. Consider these approaches that can make sharing power a particularly rewarding part of a developmental relationship.

Teach What You Learn

Young people from historically marginalized communities experienced mutual respect from staff when they were treated as competent and capable in a national study of innovative career readiness and education programs. They also experienced shared power in these programs when staff asked them to take on leadership roles within their cohorts by teaching others what they had learned.

Source: A national Search Institute study of innovative career readiness and education programs.

- 1. Establish norms:** At the outset of your work with young people, agree together on a set of statements that describe the ways you will work together and treat each other.
- 2. Share responsibility:** Whenever it is possible and appropriate, do things alongside young people, such as cleaning up a space together or raising your voices about an issue in the community.
- 3. Practice perspective taking:** When you and a young person disagree about something, take time to understand each other's point of view. Make it clear you respect their thoughts and feelings even if you disagree. Ask questions to better understand their point of view.
- 4. Offer explanations:** Explain the rationale for your own actions, especially when giving consequences or if you are unable to include a young person in a decision that affects them. (If you think you are unable to include a young person in a decision that affects them, ask yourself why. You may discover ways that you can actually include them if you think outside the box.)
- 5. Be willing to be wrong:** Admit when you've made a mistake and apologize, including naming ways you'll do better or try to change in the future.
- 6. Encourage choice:** Give youth more than one option to choose from, such as letting them pick their own partners or groups, choose between a few different activities, decide how to spend their free time, or select topics to read about or assignments to complete.
- 7. Encourage voice:** Invite young people to share their thoughts and opinions and to provide feedback. Remind them that their voices are important within and beyond the program. Ask, "what do you think about _____?" Take in their ideas seriously.

8. Respond to feedback: When you solicit young people’s input, let them know how you will integrate it into your thinking, your decisions, and/or your actions. Be sure to either act on that input or explain why you have chosen or are not able to do so. Young people tell us that being asked for their ideas and never receiving a response can be discouraging and demoralizing. Also, when you act on young people’s feedback, always give them credit for their ideas.

9. Practice democracy: Empower young people to make decisions together, and provide ways for them to vote or come to consensus to make decisions.

10. Build leadership skills: Encourage young people to take on leadership roles that suit their personalities. Some like to lead “behind the scenes,” some like to be more “out front.” Take time to invite each young person you work with to be a leader in their own way.

Respond to Feedback

Students appreciated it when their teacher solicited feedback on a short survey about how the classroom was arranged as well as other topics. After receiving feedback from students, the teacher made changes to the schedule and physical space to accommodate their requests. This made them feel heard, appreciated, and more motivated to do their best.

Source: A Search Institute study of teacher-student relationships and motivation.



Blend Elements: Express Care & Share Power

Be honest about things you don’t know about. Young people often appreciate being asked about their culture or background when the questions come from a place of respect and caring. (But recognize a young person’s comfort level with sharing about the subject. Do not put the burden of educating others about a particular identity, oppression, or marginalization on a young person unless they express a desire to do so.)

APPROACHES TO EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES



Expand Possibilities may seem like something you mostly do by going to new places or talking about new ideas. Yet it begins with a relationship in which you know and see the other person in ways that other people might not—including the person themselves. Your insights on who they are and your own experiences, ideas, connections, and imagination may be able to open up new possibilities that they hadn't considered. When that happens, they'll always remember you for it.

Places You Would Never Go

Adults who get to know young people and their interests, and connect them with opportunities can have a big impact. For example, one young person described an adult in her life who expanded possibilities for her by encouraging her to join a dance team. This young person noted, "She always has something new to offer, but it's usually an opportunity. As in somewhere for you to go, some place for you to audition. . . . she takes you to places that you never would have thought you would have explored or have been interested in." Through this relationship, the young person was inspired to "try new things in life."

Source: A national Search Institute study of non-parent, non-teacher youth-adult relationships that lead to thriving.

- 1. Use culturally responsive content:** Make sure content you use is reflective of the young people in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, age, culture, religion, sexuality, ability, etc. For example, if you are making a collage using magazine pictures, make sure the youth can see themselves in the images.
- 2. Introduce options:** Ensure that young people are aware of multiple possibilities before they make important decisions. For example, when discussing life after high school with young people, be sure they know about and consider a wide variety of options, including 2- and 4-year colleges, careers, internships, apprenticeships, and trade schools. Make connections between young people's strengths, dreams, and interests and these future opportunities.
- 3. Broaden perspectives:** Recommend things to watch, listen to, or read to gain exposure to new ideas, prompt consideration of different perspectives, and expand a young person's thinking about a topic.
- 4. Help them go deeper:** Ask about and listen for things that young people are curious about or like to do. When you discover such a subject or interest, encourage the young person to learn more about it. When possible, provide them with resources to engage in and build on that interest, such as clubs, classes, events, books, websites, field trips, guest speakers, or other opportunities.
- 5. Promote diversity:** Facilitate conversations and connections among young people that cross lines of difference.
- 6. Take field trips:** Bring young people to places they've never been to before. This can include in-person trips to destinations near or far, or virtual field trips. Take time to reflect together on what they learned through this new experience.

7. Make introductions: Introduce young people to other people or organizations who have expertise in something they want to learn or get better at. Encourage these new connections to share their stories with youth and for youth to ask questions about their experiences. Some youth may be nervous to meet new people, especially if they are older or have a role/position that could be intimidating. Rather than making an introduction and leaving the young person to connect independently, meet with the new person and the young person together so everyone feels comfortable.

8. Say what you see in them: When you see a talent in a young person that they might not see themselves, let them know, “I think you might be really good at this.”

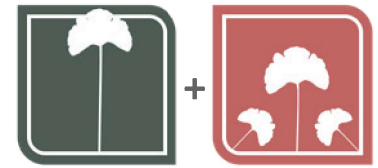
9. Share stories of how different people find their path in life: Whether it be examples from the lives of famous people or historical figures, interviewing other adults in your community, or sharing your own story, help young people see that there are many ways that an individual’s life experiences and decisions shape the journey they take in becoming adults and figuring out what they want to do in life.

10. Help young people think forward, act now: Provide young people with experiences and share insights that help them understand that the things they do in the present will influence the options that they have in the future.

“She Gave Me a Book”

Adults who help youth think concretely about their future goals and connect them with new ideas open up opportunities that they may have not otherwise learned about. One young person explained, “You know how they ask us, ‘What do you wanna be when you grow up?’ I would be stuck. And then they would tell me about jobs that I didn’t even know existed, and some of those jobs are really cool.” Another young person gave an example of how, through their relationship, an adult staff member encouraged further learning about the issue of segregation: “When we were talking about police brutality, she asked us, ‘What do you think the root causes are?’ So, I said, ‘geographical segregation,’ and then after that, two days later, she gave me a book.”

Source: A national Search Institute study of youth-serving organizations.



Blend Elements: Expand Possibilities & Provide Support

Introduce young people to others who can support them. Sometimes these people might be new to them; other times you may identify a person that a young person already knows but highlight how that person could be supportive in a new way.

For example, staff in a large congregation shared that instead of fully supporting all the youth themselves, they connected youth with other adults who could support them. One staff member shared that the congregation connects elders with young people so they can build relationships and the elders can share their experience with the young people.