

# RELATIONSHIPS FIRST

CREATING  
CONNECTIONS THAT  
HELP YOUNG  
PEOPLE THRIVE



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## BEYOND THE CLICHÉ

“It’s all about relationships.” That statement has become a cliché, whether the focus is on parenting, mentoring, teaching, coaching, raising money for a cause, getting a job, or finding a partner. And the cliché has research behind it: We’ve known for decades that high-quality relationships are essential to young people’s growth, learning, and thriving—including for those young people who face serious challenges in their lives and in the world around them. (See box.)

Yet, as many as 40 percent of young people feel lonely.<sup>11,26</sup> If we say relationships really matter, how do we make them a true priority for all young people to experience? How much do we invest in high-quality relationships in our families, schools, and youth programs?

Growing evidence suggests that strategically and systematically investing in building developmental relationships can be catalytic for effective education, programs, and services for children, youth, and families. Researchers Li and Julian wrote:

The effectiveness of child-serving programs, practices, and policies is determined first and foremost by whether they strengthen or weaken developmental relationships. . . . When developmental relationships are prevalent, development is promoted, and when this type of relationship is not available or diluted, interventions show limited effects.<sup>14</sup>

To respond, we first have to ask: What makes a relationship “developmental”? In other words, what happens in relationships that contribute to learning, growing, and thriving? And how do we start doing something as nebulous as “improving relationships”?

## NEW INSIGHTS BUILT ON A STRONG LEGACY

Search Institute is committed to exploring these questions with colleagues and partners. This booklet introduces what we’re learning and provides some starting points for action by organizations and leaders dedicated to children and youth. Here’s what you’ll find:

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## THE CENTRALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are at the heart of what youth need to learn, grow, and thrive.

**Resilience:** “Whether the burdens come from the hardships of poverty, the challenges of parental substance abuse or serious mental illness, the stresses of war, the threats of recurrent violence or chronic neglect, or a combination of factors, the single most common finding is that children who end up doing well have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.”

— *National Scientific Council on the Developing Child*<sup>17</sup>

**Growth:** “Supportive relationships are critical ‘mediums’ of development. They provide an environment of reinforcement, good modeling, and constructive feedback for physical, intellectual, and social growth.”

— *National Research Council*<sup>15</sup>

**Social-emotional skills:** “Relationships are the soil in which children’s SEL [social-emotional learning] skills grow.”

— *Jones & Bouffard*<sup>12</sup>

**Education:** “Positive relationships with adults are perhaps the single most important ingredient in promoting positive student development.”

— *Pianta, Hamre, & Allen*<sup>21</sup>

**Civic life:** “No society can long sustain itself unless its members have learned the sensitivities, motivations, and skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings.”

— *Bronfenbrenner*<sup>3</sup>

# THE DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS FRAMEWORK

It's not enough to say that relationships matter. To be actionable, teachable, and measurable, we must specify some of the ways young people interact with others that contribute to their learning, growing, and thriving.

To that end, Search Institute has embarked on a major initiative to understand and document the day-to-day actions within relationships that contribute to a young person's development. We propose that relationships are developmental when they help young people:

- Discover who they are;
- Develop abilities to shape their own lives; and
- Learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them.

Our research team identified five critical elements of developmental relationships. These elements are expressed through 20 specific actions (page 4).

Research by many other scholars shows that each element matters in young people's development.<sup>24,25</sup> In addition, our emerging research (which began with a national study of parents<sup>20</sup>) suggests that these elements work together to influence young people's learning, growth, and thriving (see pages 7-9).

## WHAT SEARCH INSTITUTE'S DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS FRAMEWORK OFFERS

This Developmental Relationships Framework invites young people, parents, teachers, coaches, program leaders, policy makers, researchers, and other adults to

focus attention on building and strengthening relationships in young people's lives. It offers the following features:

- Is relevant across different kinds of relationships in different contexts, including for young people who face serious challenges and barriers in life and in society.
- Operationalizes relationships, informing a holistic framework and approach that links theory, measures, strategies, and practical tools to improve youth outcomes and reduce inequities.
- Identifies starting points for exploring and enriching relationships—helping individuals be more intentional in how they form, grow, and adjust relationships, while also helping organizations create cultures, policies, and practices that encourage relationships to flourish.

## ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

Of course, an influential relationship for one young person may not be meaningful for another. Some relationships are fleeting. Others last a lifetime. We each need different things from different people at different times. Meaningful relationships are characterized by a dynamic give and take that shapes who we are as we grow, change, and encounter new challenges and circumstances. The framework offers a way to keep our bearings as different kinds of relationships evolve and change, so we can continue to be intentional on the ever-changing journey of learning, growing, and thriving.

## THE ROOTS OF SEARCH INSTITUTE'S DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS FRAMEWORK

The Developmental Relationships Framework grew out of focus groups with youth, parents, educators, youth workers, and others; a wide-ranging review of existing research; extensive analysis of existing data; and input from both scholars and practitioners.<sup>27</sup>

It also builds on Search Institute's landmark research with more than 5 million youth on Developmental Assets—critical supports and strengths they need to thrive. Peter L. Benson, who created the asset framework, wrote:

After decades of forming hypotheses, conducting surveys, crafting and rewriting definitions, analyzing data, and writing journal articles, Search Institute researchers and practitioners have arrived at a surprisingly simple conclusion: nothing—*nothing*—has more impact in the life of a child than positive relationships.<sup>2</sup>

# SEARCH INSTITUTE'S DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS FRAMEWORK

A developmental relationship involves a dynamic mix of five elements, which are expressed through 20 actions. Because relationships are, by definition, bidirectional, each person in a strong relationship engages in and experiences each of these actions. However, for the purpose of clarity, this framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person.

Elements	Actions	Definitions
<b>Express Care</b>  Show me that I matter to you.	Be dependable Listen Believe in me Be warm Encourage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be someone I can trust.</li> <li>• Really pay attention when we are together.</li> <li>• Make me feel known and valued.</li> <li>• Show me you enjoy being with me.</li> <li>• Praise me for my efforts and achievements.</li> </ul>
<b>Challenge Growth</b>  Push me to keep getting better.	Expect my best Stretch Hold me accountable Reflect on failures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expect me to live up to my potential.</li> <li>• Push me to go further.</li> <li>• Insist I take responsibility for my actions.</li> <li>• Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.</li> </ul>
<b>Provide Support</b>  Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.	Navigate Empower Advocate Set boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guide me through hard situations and systems.</li> <li>• Build my confidence to take charge of my life.</li> <li>• Defend me when I need it.</li> <li>• Put in place limits to keep me on track.</li> </ul>
<b>Share Power</b>  Treat me with respect and give me a say.	Respect me Include me Collaborate Let me lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take me seriously and treat me fairly.</li> <li>• Involve me in decisions that affect me.</li> <li>• Work with me to solve problems and reach goals.</li> <li>• Create opportunities for me to take action and lead.</li> </ul>
<b>Expand Possibilities</b>  Connect me with people and places that broaden my horizon.	Inspire Broaden Horizons Connect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspire me to see possibilities for my future.</li> <li>• Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places</li> <li>• Introduce me to more people who can help me grow.</li> </ul>

# HOW YOUNG PEOPLE DESCRIBE THE POWER OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Search Institute has interviewed hundreds of young people from different backgrounds and in different settings about the important relationships in their lives. Here are examples of how they describe their experiences of developmental relationships with adults.

				
<p><b>Express Care</b></p>	<p><b>Challenge Growth</b></p>	<p><b>Provide Support</b></p>	<p><b>Share Power</b></p>	<p><b>Expand Possibilities</b></p>
<p>“He made me feel like I was a better person, like I was worth something—worth more than I had put myself out to be.”</p>	<p>“Even if it’s really hard, the [staff] will most likely try to motivate you to do the right thing. . . . Even though you might think it’s hard, they know you can do it.”</p>	<p>“She helped me out with a nice place to live for 30 days when it was 21 below zero and I had nowhere to go.”</p>	<p>“My [youth leader] is, like, ‘I’m here, you’re here, we’re equal.’ And if we’re working on something together I can tell her, ‘No, this isn’t going to work.’”</p>	<p>“She puts you around people who’ve reached the places you wanna go in life. . . . And when you see people who come from the same places that you do, . . . it gives you hope.”</p>

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS CAN ALL BE DEVELOPMENTAL

The Developmental Relationships Framework articulates elements and actions within relationships that can be experienced in a single relationship. They can also be experienced in a wide range of relationships with different people at home, at school, and in the community. Young people are most likely to do well when they have at least one well-rounded, strong, and sustained relationship in their lives, as well as a broader web of many positive relationships across the places they spend time and the people with whom they interact.

Here are conclusions from other researchers about relationships with different people in young people’s lives.

**Mentors and other non-family adults:** “VIPs [very important people who are nonparental adults] tend to provide a combination of positive adult qualities . . . and ‘peer-like’ relations. . . . Through their relationships with VIPs, adolescents often have an experientially rich and interpersonally supportive environment for development.”

— *Beam, Chen, & Greenberger*<sup>1</sup>

**Parents:** “Regardless of age, children need parents. Indeed, across multiple studies, it appears that the quality of the parent-child relationship is one of the more important factors in determining what kind of behaviors and attitudes adolescents adopt across domains such as health, education, reproductive behaviors, social interactions, and problem behaviors.”

— *Hair, Moore, Garrett et al.*<sup>10</sup>

**Friends:** “Close and intimate connections with peers . . . during adolescence are essential for psychological and emotional development.

— *Niwa, Rogers, & Way*<sup>18</sup>

**Teachers:** “When teachers learn to make modest efforts to form a personal connection with their adolescent students—such that the students feel known—they can dramatically enhance student motivation in school and emotional functioning outside of school.”

— *Pianta, Hamre, & Allen*<sup>21</sup>

**Program leaders:** “Community programs for youth provide opportunities to expose young people to caring adults who challenge them, encourage them to participate in positive experiences, and respect their opinions. . . . [Guidance from adults] may be one of the most important characteristics of highly valued programs.”

— *National Research Council*<sup>5</sup>

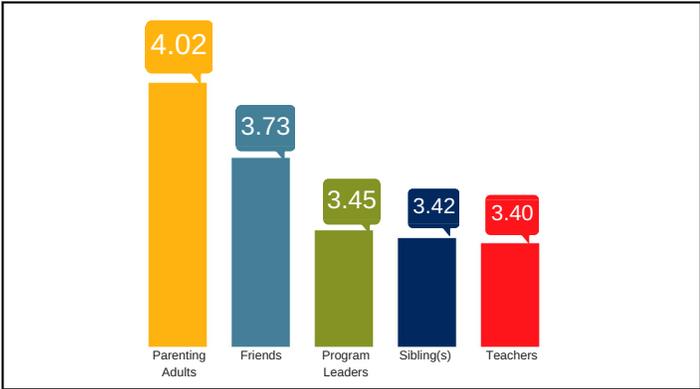
# ONE COMMUNITY'S SNAPSHOT

## OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

How often do young people experience the five elements of developmental relationships? A 2016 Search Institute survey of 25,395 students, grades 6 – 12, in a large, diverse U.S. city asked one question about how often they experienced each of the five elements of developmental relationships. Participants responded five times, each time focusing on a different kind of relationship: parents, siblings,\* friends, teachers, and program leaders. (Future studies will expand to other communities and will deepen measures of each kind of relationship.)

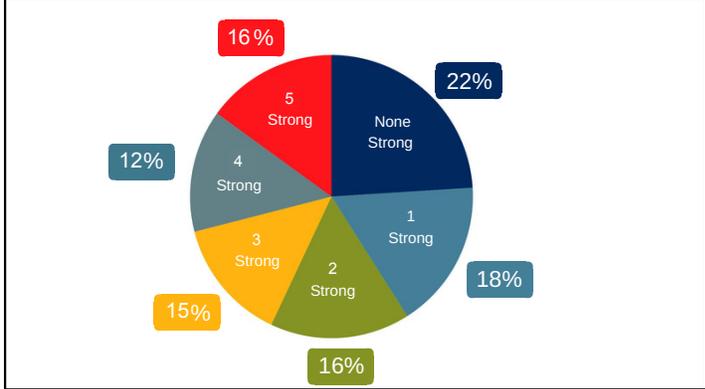
### STRENGTHS IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTING ADULTS

Looking across all five elements of a developmental relationship, young people reported the most strength in their relationships with parenting adults, followed by friends. Relationships with siblings, teachers, and program leaders (such as coaches, mentors, and club leaders) were roughly similar (3 = “sometimes,” 4 = “often”).



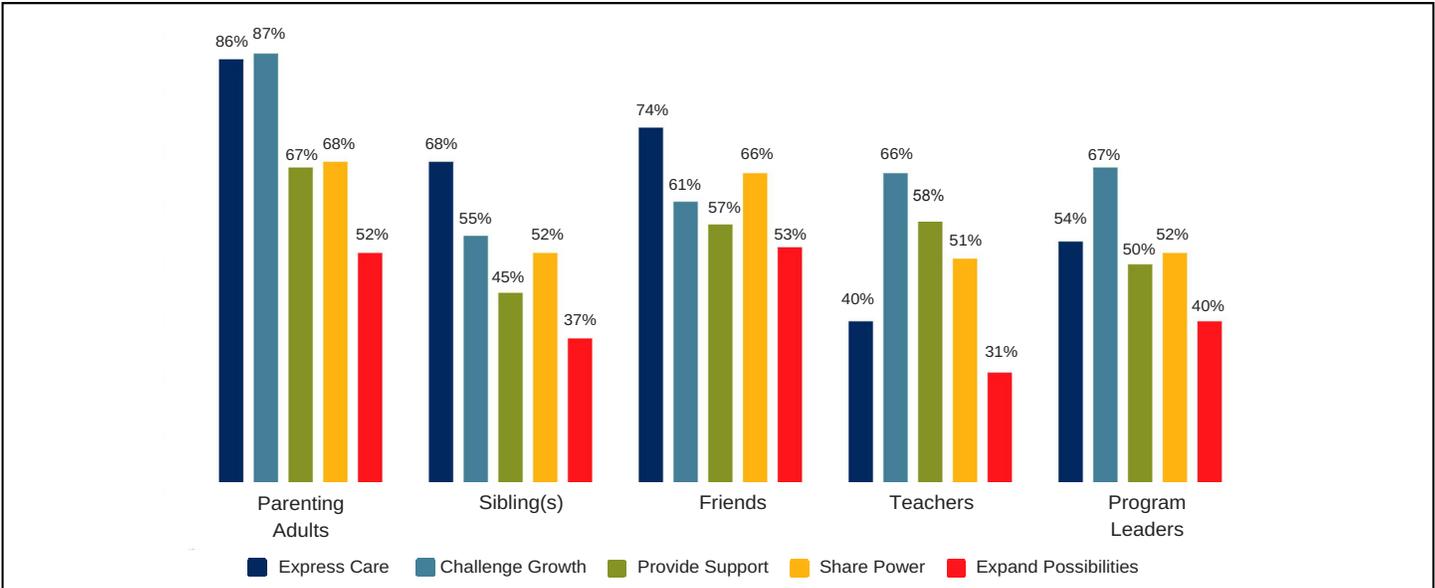
### MANY YOUTH LACK STRONG WEBS OF RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are considered “strong” when young people experience the 5 elements of developmental relationships, on average, often or very often. In this study, only 28% of young people experience strength in 4 or 5 types of relationships. On the other hand, 40% identify just one or no types of relationships that are, on average, strong.



### DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIPS CONTRIBUTE DIFFERENT STRENGTHS

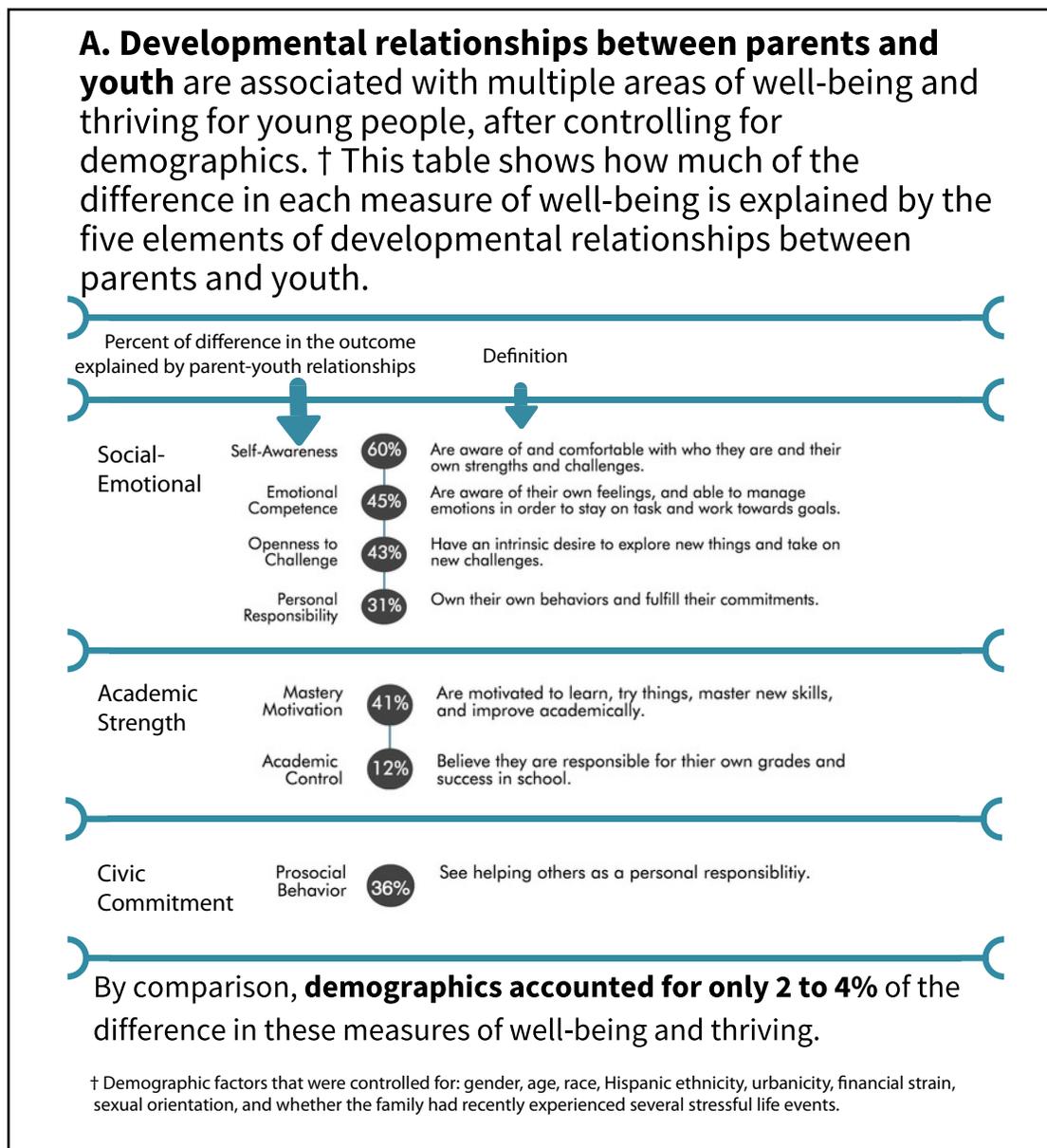
Young people differ in the elements of developmental relationships they report experiencing most in different kinds of relationships. Across all relationships, middle and high school students are least likely to experience “expand possibilities.” Here are the percentages of young people in this one community who said they experienced each of the five elements of developmental relationships “often” or “very often” within each type of relationship.



# WHY DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

The Developmental Relationships Framework focuses on elements of relationships that contribute to a young person’s growth, learning, and thriving. Through studies that examine different relationships, Search Institute has begun to document the power of these relationships in young people’s lives, building on a wide range of existing research by many scholars on the power of relationships.

## 1. YOUNG PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE STRONG DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE MORE LIKELY TO REPORT A WIDE RANGE OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL STRENGTHS AND OTHER INDICATORS OF WELL-BEING AND THRIVING



SOURCES: A. Cross-sectional studies of 633 matched parent-adolescent pairs from one semi-urban and one rural community in the United States. B. A survey of 675 students in grades 6 to 8 in a large, suburban middle school. C. 917 participants in an immersive conservation-focused summer program, reporting on their relationships with crew leaders and members.<sup>27</sup>

## B. Teacher-student relationships

Middle school students who reported high levels of developmental relationships with their teachers were 8 times more likely to stick with challenging tasks, enjoy working hard, and know it is okay to make mistakes when learning, when compared to students with low levels of student-teacher relationships.



## C. Program leaders

When young people experienced strong developmental relationships with leaders during a conservative service experience, they were more likely to exhibit: conservation leadership; a sense of community identity; and social responsibility.



## 2. YOUNG PEOPLE WITH STRONG RELATIONSHIPS ARE MORE RESILIENT IN THE FACE OF STRESS AND TRAUMA.

Families dealing with adversity are better equipped to mitigate the negative impact of stressful events when they have robust parent-child relationships. If young people in high-stressed families\* have strong developmental relationships with their parents, then they are . . .

- 21 times more likely to manage their emotions well.
- 17 times more likely to take personal responsibility for their actions.
- 5 times more likely to be good at making and keeping plans.
- 4 times more likely to have a sense of purpose in life.†

## 3. YOUNG PEOPLE DO BETTER WHEN THEY EXPERIENCE A STRONG WEB OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH MANY PEOPLE.

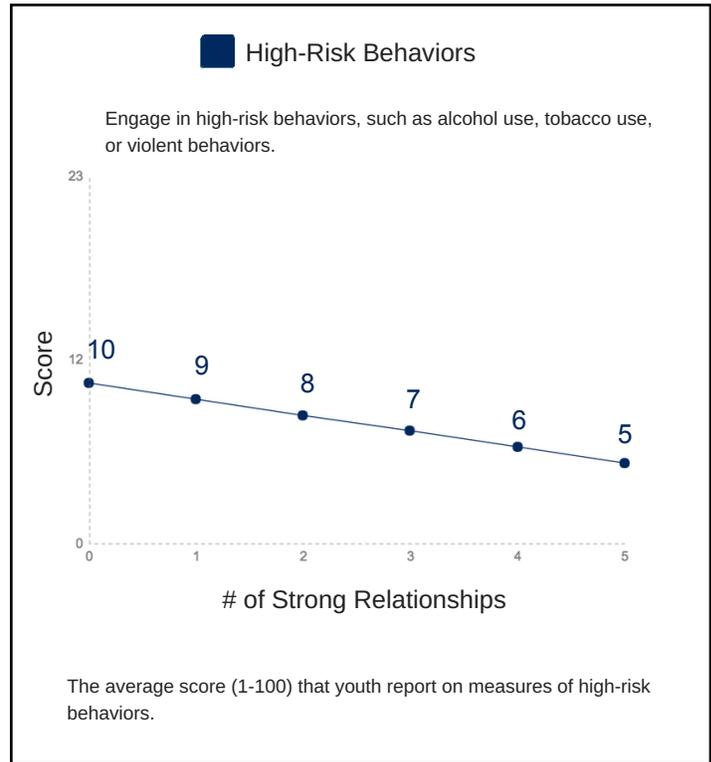
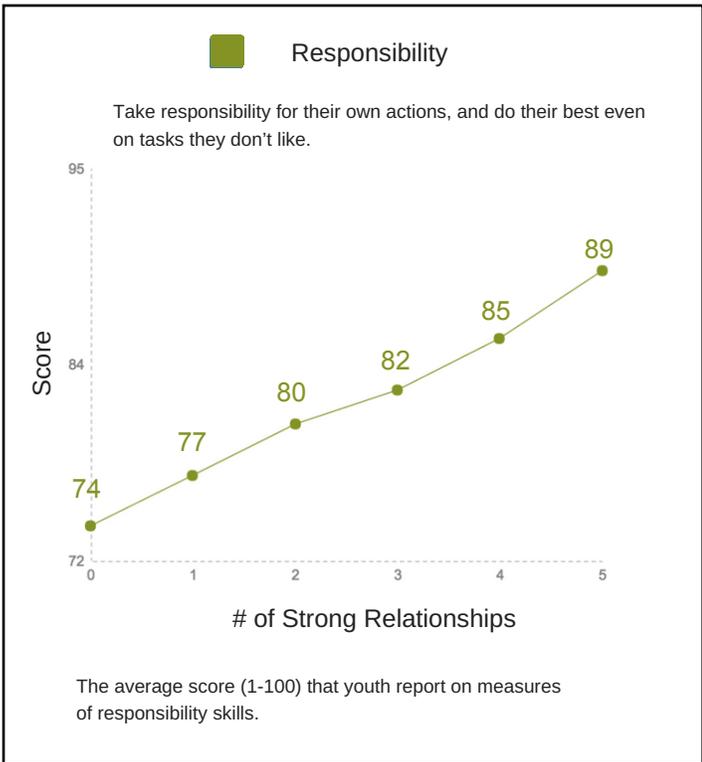
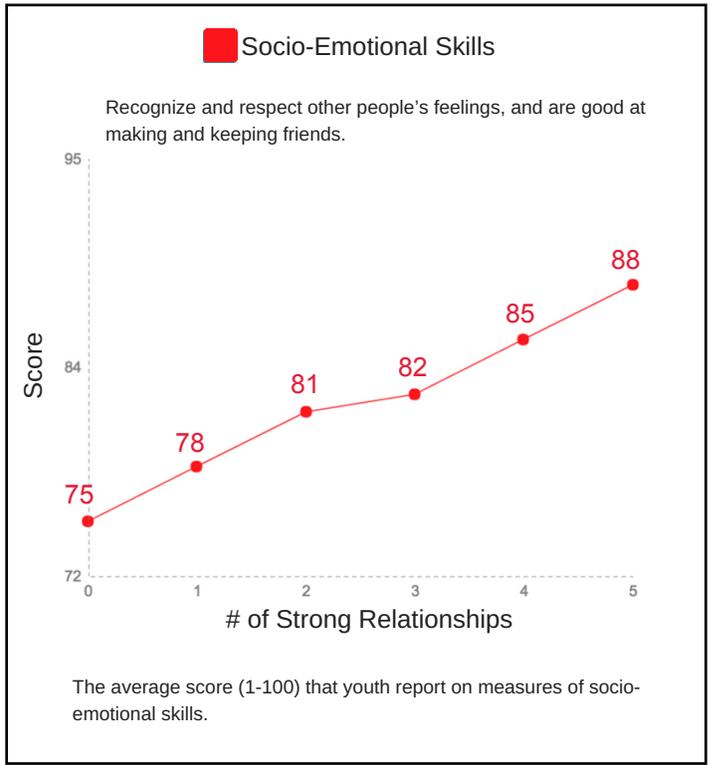
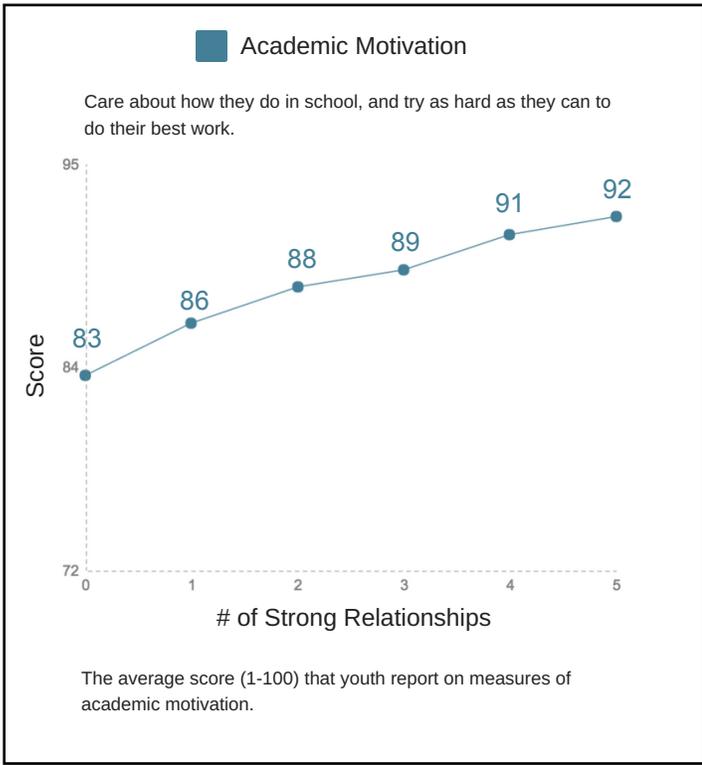
Each relationship can be an important source of strength. But, young people do even better when they have a strong web of many developmental relationships. This finding reinforces the importance of nurturing many developmental relationships in young people's lives, each of which complements and reinforces the others.

The charts on page 9 show the average score (from 1 to 100) that youth report on measures of each element of well-being or risk, based on the strength of their web of relationships.‡ Data are from surveys of 25,395 students, grades 6 – 12, in a large U.S. city. (See page 5 for more information about the web of relationships.)

\* High-stressed families are those who scored in the top 30% on a measure of 14 high-stress events or experiences in family life, including death of a parent, a family member's incarceration, or a chronic illness or disability.<sup>23</sup>

† Findings are from a study of 633 families in two communities. A parent and a youth in each family completed the survey. For these analyses, data on stressful life events came from the parent survey. Measures of relationships and outcomes are from the youth surveys. These calculations were made after accounting for a number of demographic differences, including the youth's gender, age, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, financial strain, and sexual orientation.

‡ Each well-being measure was calculated on a 5-point scale, and then multiplied to create a 100-point index. "High-risk behaviors" is based on a composite measure of 24 behaviors. The web of relationships is based on youth reporting about the types of relationships (e.g., with parents, teachers) in which they experience the five elements of a developmental relationship "often" or "very often."



# HOW DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS GROW

The research on relationships and the emerging framework offers fresh insights into the elements of relationships, and their role in young people's growth and learning. But how do they start, grow, and change over time? Search Institute is just beginning to explore the processes that may be at work.

As a starting point, it's clear that all strong relationships are dynamic and changing, not rigid and unchanging.<sup>6</sup> They evolve as the people in them grow, and they also stimulate growth for each person.

Although each relationship is unique, it can be helpful to articulate how actions might be intentionally phased across time. The figure on page 9 illustrates one potential path, beginning with basic relationship actions and adding others as a relationship deepens.

Many factors can alter this pathway, including how often people interact with each other, each person's relational skills, the setting they are in, and many other factors. For example, when we are intentional about listening, we may discover a need to advocate for that young person to address a pressing need, thus shifting the path of our relationship.

## A PATH THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS FRAMEWORK

Where might you start with building developmental relationships? Each relationship is different, involving different people, at different places in their own developmental journeys, and in different settings. In some cases, the first phases may pass quickly. In others, it may take years.

Relationships are not linear; they have their ups and down, and their backs and forths. Different aspects of relationships have to be revisited and renegotiated as people, experiences, and circumstances change. Phases recycle as circumstances change and as young people grow. And, all these changes are occurring for both people in a relationship, not just the young person. As, one parent told us about their relationship with their child, "He's my first child, and I still learn from him. I learn from him every day.

"Within this complexity, it can be helpful to reflect on which relationship actions might be most meaningful at different phases of a relationship. Where might you start? Mentoring<sup>9</sup> and other fields offer clues about potential phases in building new developmental relationships, shown in the display below. Over time, Search Institute will refine our understanding of these processes, through learning partnerships in diverse settings.

### A DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIP IN REAL LIFE

**"ANYTHING YOU NEED, YOU CAN COME TO HER ABOUT."**

*To create and refine the Developmental Relationships Framework, Search Institute has conducted interviews and focus groups with young people across the United States. Cedric's story is based on an in-depth interview. Names and details have been changed to maintain anonymity.*

When Cedric first met Miss Lonnie, you would have assumed the relationship was going nowhere. Cedric's sister had coaxed him to go to an arts class Miss Lonnie led, but he didn't go back after the first time. In his own words, he was "a really shy kid who didn't really talk to anybody."

However, Cedric's passion for art grew, as did his self-confidence. Years later he returned, and he became really involved in the programs Miss Lonnie was leading. By the time he was a high school senior, Cedric thought of Miss Lonnie first, when asked about important adults in his life beyond his family. Miss Lonnie became "a second mom and a sister." Listening to Cedric, you can hear how his relationship with Miss Lonnie reflects each element of a developmental relationship:

**Express Care:** Cedric describes Miss Lonnie as "accessible, not judgmental," and "always available and here for you." Because "she listens a lot and is very open," he can talk to her about almost anything, and "it won't be weird or uncomfortable."

**Challenge Growth:** Miss Lonnie pushes Cedric to "find out who I was and what I wanna do in life. . . . No matter who she works with, she sees the potential in you."

**Provide Support:** "She's here for you, pretty much anything you need. She tries to help you with as best she can, whether it's advice or you need a ride somewhere, someone just to talk to."

**Share Power:** When their after-school group was planning a college tour, Miss Lonnie "came to me about figuring out the events and ordering the shirts and stuff. So I contacted the places, got names for the shirts, figured out how much it would cost."

**Expand Possibilities:** Miss Lonnie "surrounds us with these professional people" and gives students opportunities to explore options for their future. "I've been in a business program, accounting program, and dance. Going to these different programs that she's told me about, I've kinda discovered myself."

## AN EXAMPLE: A POSSIBLE PROGRESSION IN A DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIP

Below is an example of how you might think about the growth of a new relationship to becoming, over time, more of a developmental relationship. For example, “respect me” is listed in the first stage, since this action is often a precursor to appropriate self-disclosure that sets the stage for other actions. This is, of course, only an example. Depending on the circumstances and the relationship, other actions may be appropriate entry points. Thinking about a specific relationship you have, what progression did you experience? If forming a new relationship, how might you focus your attention based on what you know about the young person?

	1. Get to know each other Explore first impressions and shared interests.	2. Build mutual trust Explore mutual interests and bond through appropriate self-disclosure.	4. Confirm shared commitments Test the depth and boundaries of the relationship	5. Invest in each other's growth Put energy into reaching goals and adapt the relationship to match growth.
 Express Care	Listen Be warm	Be dependable Believe in me	Encourage	
 Challenge Growth		Expect my best	Stretch Hold me accountable	Reflect on failures
 Provide Support		Navigate	Empower Set boundaries	Advocate
 Share Power	Respect me	Include me Collaborate		Let me lead
 Expand Possibilities		Inspire		Broaden Horizons Connect

# ACTIVATING RELATIONSHIPS IN ORGANIZATIONS

A well-intentioned curriculum and social service system will not be effective unless its implementation builds on and enhances the quality of developmental relationships in the classroom or the community.

— Li & Julian<sup>14</sup>

A core hypothesis of Search Institute's work on developmental relationships is that enhancing relationships can strengthen youth programs and services, and improve outcomes. As we've seen, developmental relationships are consistently associated with positive outcomes for young people. Through listening to young people and others, we have been able to articulate actionable ways to be more intentional in building relationships.

But what might it look like if organizations took seriously the idea of relationships as the "active ingredient"<sup>16</sup> in the effectiveness of their programs and services? Of course, the specific strategies will look different in schools, after-school programs, faith communities, social or work settings, and other youth development organizations. However, a focus on actively cultivating a relationally rich culture grounded in relational trust<sup>4</sup> has tremendous potential for enhancing effectiveness and impact across a wide variety of organizational settings.

## STARTING POINTS

It might be tempting to begin by designing new program or campaign that focuses on promoting relationships. Yet, relationships are already being built in any school, youth program, and other places. What is needed is an intentional focus on building developmental relationships. Building a relationally rich culture school or program. This might include the following strategies:

- Introduce staff, young people, volunteers, families, and other stakeholders to the idea and importance of developmental relationships. Ask: How do they see this approach fitting with shared priorities? The "levels of relationships" box highlights the need to recognize and operationalize a variety of roles in building relationships within an organization.
- Examine how your organization already invests in building relationships and identify opportunities for focused attention. Prime thinking with the 7 questions on page 13.
- Have individuals identify ways they can start building developmental relationships right away (Share tips from the list on pages 14-15.)

## PILOTING PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Search Institute has begun working with partners to develop processes and tools to mobilize individuals, groups and organizations to become more intentional about nurturing developmental relationships. Here are some examples of our first work, with focused efforts in other settings on the horizon.

**Teacher-student relationships:** Most educators recognize the importance of student-teacher relationships.<sup>30</sup> However, it can be challenging to focus on building relationships when accountability is elsewhere and when you teach dozens, if not hundreds, of students each semester. Search Institute is working with 12 Minnesota schools to create the REACH Process, a system of classroom activities and teacher professional development opportunities that

## LEVELS OF RELATIONSHIPS IN ORGANIZATIONS

A common reaction to the detailed articulation of elements of developmental relationships is to say, "I can't do all that with everyone." However, the goal is not to require every person to have a deep, sustained relationship with every young person. Rather, how can you ensure that each and every young person is embedded in a web of positive relationships?

Think about different levels of relationships that are consistent with the Developmental Relationships Framework:

- **All:** What relational actions are expected by everyone, such as treating each other with respect and warmth?
- **Some:** What kinds of relational actions are expected (and realistic) for interactions with groups of youth, such as knowing the names of students in your classroom?
- **A few:** Who are the handful of young people each person will invest in because of a particular connection or opportunity, such as sharing a passion for music or basketball, or because the young person him- or herself invites a stronger relationship?

emphasizes teacher-student relationships as a catalyst for improving students' academic motivation.

All REACH components are built on factors identified in research that contribute to student motivation, with relationships as the vital starting point (the “R” in REACH). Other key factors include students' Effort, Aspirations, Cognition, and Heart.<sup>19</sup> This approach focuses on creating a school-wide commitment to activating these “active ingredients” in student motivation. Ongoing research is both focused on strengthening the model and building evidence of its impact.

**Family relationships:** Few would dispute that parent-child and other family relationships are vital for a young person's well-being.<sup>22,29</sup> But don't relationships really matter most in early childhood? And can—and should—schools and other organizations invest in strengthening parent-youth relationships? If it's hard to get parents to show up for parent nights and other events, will they value opportunities focused on building family relationships?

Search Institute is exploring these questions through a pilot program, Keep Connected, with partners from California to Washington, DC. Through six workshops plus a graduation celebration, middle school students and their parents explore their relationships separately and in combined sessions.

**Peer relationships:** Relationships among peers have potential to be particularly catalytic for learning and development during middle school and high school.<sup>5</sup> Working with Barbara Varenhorst, a founder of the peer-helping movement, Search Institute is partnering with middle and high schools to understand and strengthen peer relationships. This effort involves testing tools and services that schools and programs can use to enhance peer relationships and measure their impact.

Our hypothesis is that high-quality peer programs can help peers build developmental relationships with each other (and adult leaders) that enhance the social-emotional strengths needed for school success, health, and civic engagement. Through this work, we will learn more about how schools and organizations can intentionally cultivate positive peer relationships as resources for growth and learning.

**Exploring other relationships:** Over time, Search Institute will engage with a range of partners to examine and strengthen different kinds of relationships, including relationships with program leaders and mentors. Each effort will be designed to enhance, not replace, existing content emphases, based on the premise that relationships function as the “active ingredient” to increase the effectiveness of other youth development and educational strategies.

## 7 QUESTIONS

### How Does Your Organization Invest in Relationships?

Use these questions for reflection and dialogue with colleagues and stakeholders:

1. **Experience:** How consistently do young people experience developmental relationships in your organization? Are some groups of youth more likely than others to experience them?
2. **Expectations:** How clearly articulated are relationship actions that are essential to your mission, strategy, and culture?
3. **Time:** Is regular time dedicated to building relationships with and among youth? What happens during that time?
4. **Personnel:** How are abilities to nurture strong relationships factored into staff and volunteer hiring and development?
5. **Budget:** How might your budget more explicitly reflect your commitment to reinforcing relationships?
6. **Training:** How often do staff meetings or professional development focus on practical ways to cultivate relationships?
7. **Feedback:** How do you collect and use data, feedback, or other information that can help monitor and strengthen intentional relationship building?

Think about what might happen if you were to increase your investment in these areas. How might youth, staff, parents, and other stakeholders respond?

# 55 IDEAS FOR DEEPENING ONE-TO-ONE RELATIONSHIPS

The Developmental Relationships Framework focuses on aspects of relationships that can be changed through intentional action. Try the following tips for strengthening each element of developmental relationships with and among young people. (Of course, ideas for one group can be adapted for others.) These ideas build on insights from focus groups and interviews, as well as research on the elements of developmental relationships.

ELEMENTS	ALL ADULTS	YOUNG PEOPLE
<p><b>Express Care</b></p> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pay attention. Focus on youth when they are talking about things that matter to them. Put away your cell phone.</li> <li>2. Follow up with young people when you learn about what they are going through something, rather than waiting for them to bring it up again.</li> <li>3. Make time for lightness. Share in some humor, fun, and laughter amid the practical tasks.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16. When taking with friends, ask follow-up questions that help you get to know them better.</li> <li>17. Let friends know you noticed when they do something you admire.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Challenge Growth</b></p> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Highlight future goals. Talk with young people about the things they look forward to or dream about.</li> <li>5. Expand their thinking by asking hard questions, providing alternate explanations, and encouraging openness to different opinions. This helps them expand their own thinking.</li> <li>6. Emphasize mistakes are a necessary part of learning. Praise them for hard work, whether they succeed or fail.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18. Encourage friends to spend time doing things that will help them reach their future goals and dreams.</li> <li>19. Model how you put in effort to learn. Push back if others dismiss the value of learning.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Provide Support</b></p> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Offer information and practical help to solve a practical problem, or loan them something they may need.</li> <li>8. Show young people how to ask for help when they need it.</li> <li>9. Shift levels of support. Give more support when young people are struggling, and less when they are making progress. Step back as their skills and confidence build.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20. When a friend can't figure out how to solve a problem, offer to talk it out together.</li> <li>21. Offer your support when friends face challenges. If needed, ask a trusted adult to be an ally and resource.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Share Power</b></p> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Let young people make decisions about activities you do together and what you talk about. Don't jump in too fast when they don't make quick decisions or think of things to talk about.</li> <li>11. When you can, offer choices ("So, what could you do differently to tackle this problem?"), rather than always giving instructions.</li> <li>12. Learn from young people—and show it. Young people have a lot to teach adults. Let them know when you've learned something from them that you're excited about.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>22. When you're on a team or in a group, practice listening to others, negotiating, and making decisions that work well for everyone.</li> <li>23. Notice peers who tend to be left out or are quiet. Find ways to include them and give them a voice.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Expand Possibilities</b></p> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. When young people seem curious about an activity, topic, or issue, ask questions such as "what strikes you about this?"</li> <li>14. Introduce young people to a wide range of people, places, ideas, cultures, and vocations. Start with ones they're curious about.</li> <li>15. Broaden the web of relationships. Connect young people to people who share their interests or can expand their world.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>24. Take turns with friends trying new food, music, or outings, based on each other's interests.</li> <li>25. Introduce friends to people who can help them learn things that interest them.</li> </ol>

## YOUTH PROGRAM LEADERS

### PARENTING ADULTS

### TEACHERS

	PARENTING ADULTS	TEACHERS	YOUTH PROGRAM LEADERS
<p><b>Express Care</b></p> 	<p>26. Ask follow-up questions so you both know you're interested and tracking.</p> <p>27. Find satisfaction in doing things for and with your child, even if these things wouldn't otherwise be important to you.</p>	<p>36. Strive to understand and show sensitivity to students' feelings.</p> <p>37. Use varied teaching strategies to make learning enjoyable, and to help students connect with you and each other.</p>	<p>46. Work to understand young people's points of view when they share ideas or opinions.</p> <p>47. Do what you say you will do, and keep your promises.</p>
<p><b>Challenge Growth</b></p> 	<p>28. Expect your children to do their best, even when doing something they don't really like.</p> <p>29. Teach your children that making mistakes is a part of learning.</p>	<p>38. Emphasize mastery and self-improvement more so than doing better than other students.</p> <p>39. Challenge students to reach high expectations. Hold them accountable.</p>	<p>48. Challenge young people to try things that are a little hard for them to do.</p> <p>49. Help young people find their own solutions, rather than just telling them what to do.</p>
<p><b>Provide Support</b></p> 	<p>30. When you teach your child a skill, demonstrate it by breaking it into smaller steps.</p> <p>31. When your children are not getting the help they need, find people who can address the issue.</p>	<p>40. Provide specific and descriptive feedback for students to use toward their improvement.</p> <p>41. Teach strategies for performing and learning under pressure.</p>	<p>50. Help young people think through options and resources when they encounter obstacles.</p> <p>51. Show young people how to ask for help when they need it.</p>
<p><b>Share Power</b></p> 	<p>32. Include your children in thinking about decisions, even when you have to make the final call.</p> <p>33. When you disagree, take time to understand each other's point of view.</p>	<p>42. Give students classroom choices within rules and safety limits.</p> <p>43. Ask students for input on assignments, class content, and how they can show proficiency.</p>	<p>52. Provide opportunities for young people to lead programs based on their interests.</p> <p>53. Emphasize building community and serving others through youth-initiated projects.</p>
<p><b>Expand Possibilities</b></p> 	<p>34. Find ways for your children to spend time with people who are different from your family.</p> <p>35. Encourage your children to try things they might be interested in. Maybe even try it together.</p>	<p>44. Demonstrate how what students are learning relates to their interests and to success outside of school and in the future.</p> <p>45. Connect students with educators, other students, and community members who can explore with them areas of personal interest and strength.</p>	<p>54. Introduce young people to other cultures, ideas, and places that help them discover their place in the world.</p> <p>55. Model being a curious learner by asking questions and sharing what you're learning in your own life.</p>

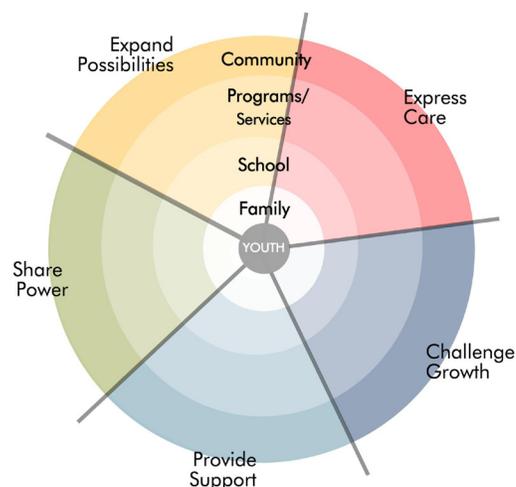
# IMAGINING STRONG AND FLEXIBLE WEBS OF RELATIONSHIPS

Spider webs are marvels of nature. They are both very strong and very flexible. By some estimates, they are five to ten times stronger than a steel web of the same weight. They can also stretch by 30 to 40 percent without breaking. Engineers who study them say that the genius of spider webs lies in this combination of strength and flexibility. One report on the research put it this way:

Spider webs, it turns out, can take quite a beating without failing. . . . Localized damage can simply be repaired, rather than replaced, or even left alone if the web continues to function as before. “Even if it has a lot of defects, the web actually still functions mechanically virtually the same way,” MIT engineer Marcus Buehler says. “It’s a very flaw-tolerant system.”<sup>8</sup>

The spider web is a useful, if imperfect, analogy for what each and every young person needs to grow and thrive. A spider depends on its web for sustenance; a young person depends on a web of relationships to shape and guide virtually every aspect of life. A web of relationships does not have to be perfect to be life sustaining. But it does need to be strong and flexible, adapting to the world around it, and to the needs and strengths of the people in those relationships.

The diagram on this page is a reminder that a strong web of relationships needs to include strands from home, school, and community; made up of parents, siblings, grandparents, friends, teachers, mentors, coaches, and many others. Current research suggests that young people are most likely to flourish when they are embedded in a



web of these relationships while also having at least three to five “anchor relationships”<sup>7,22</sup> they know they can depend on at home, at school, and in other places they spend time. All relationships are not the same. And as children grow into adulthood, the people they rely on most typically shift and change. Along the way, other relationships complement the strengths of those central relationships. Like a web, each significant relationship influences and shapes the others.

So everyone doesn’t have to do everything for every young person all the time. But, each and every young person needs a web of relationships through which they experience all five elements of developmental relationships. Each and every person can be part of some young person’s web.

## MANY QUESTIONS REMAIN TO BE EXAMINED

Search Institute is at the beginning of its focused exploration of developmental relationships. Numerous critical questions drive Search Institute’s research agenda moving forward.

- How are developmental relationships consistent and unique across cultures and contexts?
- How might strengthening developmental relationships contribute to reducing inequities in opportunities and supports for young people who are marginalized in society, including youth of color, immigrant youth, youth with special needs, low-income youth, and LGBTQ youth?
- How are different relationships (e.g., parent, teacher, peer, mentor) developmental in different ways? How do these different relationships complement each other?
- To what extent do developmental relationships enhance social-emotional strengths in domains of identity, agency, and commitment to community, which in turn predict success in school, work, and other areas of life?

Examining these and other questions is the heart of Search Institute’s research agenda, which focuses on building stronger evidence about developmental relationships. This will include mixed-methods observational, longitudinal, and experimental studies in diverse contexts.

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# RESOURCES FROM SEARCH INSTITUTE



REACH is a new set of research-based resources to strengthen students' academic motivation and put them on the path to becoming self-propelled young adults. REACH is an acronym for:

- R** elationships—Connections to learn and grow
- E** ffort—The power of a growth mindset
- A** spirations—Hopes for a positive future
- C** ognition—Key self-regulation strategies
- H** eart—Core values and sparks (deep personal interests)

The REACH suite includes a student survey, workshops for educators, technical assistance, and an in-depth implementation. For more information, visit [reach.search-institute.org](http://reach.search-institute.org)



## RELATIONSHIP-BASED RESOURCE FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Keep Connected offers a six-session workshop series for parents and their middle schoolers. Families explore the five essential elements of parent-youth relationships through a mix of learning and sharing activities. To learn more, visit: [www.parentfurther.com/content/keep-connected](http://www.parentfurther.com/content/keep-connected)

Keep Connected is aligned with ParentFurther.com, a free resource focused on encouraging families to strengthen relationships through shared activities. It includes self-quizzes and self-guided activities families can enjoy together to strengthen their relationships.

## SURVEYS

[www.search-institute.org/surveys](http://www.search-institute.org/surveys)

Identify young people's strengths and challenges by using high-quality, useful survey instruments from Search Institute. Available surveys examine developmental relationships, student motivation, youth program quality, and Developmental Assets. Each survey is offered online and includes a detailed, actionable report on findings.

## WORKSHOPS

[www.search-institute.org/keynotes-workshops](http://www.search-institute.org/keynotes-workshops)

Build expertise and develop practical strategies to put Search Institute research into practice with a range of workshops for educators, youth workers, community leaders, parents, and young people.

## OTHER RESOURCES

[www.search-institutestore.org](http://www.search-institutestore.org)

Search Institute offers a variety of books and other resources for educators, youth workers, parents, and other leaders that focus on practical strategies to build assets and other strengths with young people.

Roehlkepartain, E. C., Pekel, K., Syvertsen, A. K., Sethi, J., Sullivan, T. K., & Scales, P. C. (2017). *Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

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Search Institute is an international leader in discovering what kids need to succeed in their families, schools, and communities. Using applied research and improvement solutions, we collaborate with organizations, schools, and community coalitions to solve critical challenges in young people's lives.

