

A Research Update from Search Institute: Developmental Relationships

Both researchers and practitioners have long embraced the idea that interaction with caring adults is central to young people's development. New research being conducted at Search Institute confirms that conviction, but we are also finding that both *caring* and *adults* are necessary but not sufficient strands in the broader web of relationships that kids need to succeed. In addition to expressing care, young people also need people in their lives who challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities. And while relationships with adults can do all of those things in powerful and positive ways, so can close connections with friends, siblings, and other peers.

Search Institute has adopted the term *developmental relationships* to describe the broader conception of relationships that is the focus of our new research and development agenda. Through our work to date, we have identified 20 actions that make a relationship developmental, and we have organized those actions into a framework that is being examined empirically through a national study that will be released in fall 2014. In the most transformative developmental relationships, all of these actions are bidirectional, with each person contributing to and benefitting from them. For the purpose of clarity, however, the framework is expressed below from the perspective of one young person in a developmental relationship.

The Developmental Relationships Framework

Express CARE

Show that you like me and want the best for me.

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

CHALLENGE Growth

Insist that I try to continuously improve.

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

Provide SUPPORT

Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

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

Share POWER

Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.

- Respect—Take me seriously and treat me fairly.
- Give Voice—Ask for and listen to my opinions and consider them when you make decisions.
- Respond—Understand and adjust to my needs, interests, and abilities.
- Collaborate—Work with me to accomplish goals and solve problems.

Expand POSSIBILITIES

Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.

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

Questions and Answers on the Developmental Relationships Framework

What are developmental relationships and why do they matter?

A developmental relationship is a close connection between a young person and an adult or between a young person and a peer that powerfully and positively shapes the young person's identity and helps the young person develop a thriving mindset. A thriving mindset is a multi-dimensional construct and the subject of ongoing Search Institute research. A thriving mindset can be summarized as the orientation not just to get by in life, but to flourish—not just to survive, but to thrive.

As anyone who has worked with young people can attest, once a child has developed the drive and, over time, the ability to be the best that he or she can be, an important step has been taken on the path to becoming a productive, happy, and contributing member of society. When a thriving mindset shapes a young person's decisions and actions, he or she is more likely to work hard both inside and outside of school, and to develop a range of social and emotional skills that are essential for success in some type of college, work, and civic life.

Where does the Developmental Relationships Framework come from?

The Developmental Relationships Framework builds on Search Institute's foundational research on Developmental Assets as well as a year of focused quantitative and qualitative analyses and reviews of research on the importance, quality, and nature of relationships that make a positive difference in young people's lives. The Developmental Relationships Framework will be continually tested and refined through studies of relationships in families, schools, youth programs, and communities.

How do developmental relationships work?

Our working hypotheses include the following:

1. Interaction in a developmental relationship is bidirectional, with each person contributing to and benefitting from the relationship.
2. Though a single developmental relationship can be powerful, young people grow the most when they experience multiple developmental relationships across multiple environments.
3. Developmental relationships matter within and across the life course, cultures, and contexts. There are likely similarities and differences in how these relationships are expressed and nurtured at individual, family, community, and cultural levels.
4. Developmental relationships contribute to a number of critical outcomes, including educational performance, behavioral choices, and perseverance in the face of difficulties and distractions.

How can we create and strengthen developmental relationships?

In addition to enhancing understanding of developmental relationships through research, in the years ahead Search Institute will also work with schools, youth programs, families, and communities to co-create practical tools for strengthening developmental relationships, such as:

- **Structures:** We will identify organizational arrangements that promote the creation and strengthening of developmental relationships within schools, youth programs, and families.
- **Starters:** We will design methods and activities that put new relationships on the path to becoming developmental relationships over time.
- **Strategies:** We will identify techniques that strengthen and sustain developmental relationships in a variety of contexts.
- **Solutions:** We will discover relationship-based ways to solve pressing problems in education and youth development, such as improving academic performance and reducing risk behaviors.