An Introduction to Developmental Relationships

Relationships are the heart of education. In recent years, research has confirmed what any great teacher will tell you: **when we know our students, they learn better.**[1] To design Along, we used core principles from research—including the Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework—on how relationships can lead to stronger social and emotional competency and academic outcomes. The content in Along's Library is organized around each of the five elements of the Search Institute's applied research on developmental relationships.

Connections with Youth Outcomes

Young people are more likely to grow up successfully when they experience developmental relationships with important people in their lives. Multiple studies by the Search Institute have demonstrated that when young people experience developmental relationships with adults in families, schools, and other programs, their social-emotional competencies and academic outcomes—such as connection to school, academic motivation, and grades—are significantly stronger. The association between developmental relationships and positive youth outcomes has been found for all of the demographic groups studied to date, including African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American/Alaskan Native, Multiracial, and Latinx youth. The groups studied also include youth from all of the socioeconomic, age, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation groups that have participated in Search Institute studies.

> " Students who did report higher levels of developmental relationships with teachers feel more connected to school, are more motivated to work hard, and have better GPAs, than students whose relationships with teachers do not capture all those elements of developmental relationships.[2] "

The role of developmental relationships in promoting positive youth outcomes across demographic diversity is especially meaningful, because Search Institute has found that those relationships are not experienced equitably. A longitudinal study of teacher-student relationships conducted from 2017-2018 found that students who were eligible for free and reduced price meals and who also felt financially strained were less likely than more affluent students to report high levels of developmental relationships, either at the beginning or end of the school year.

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[1] Fredriksen, K. and Rhodes, J. (2004), The role of teacher relationships in the lives of students. New Directions for Youth Development, 2004: 45-54. doi:10.1002/yd.90

[2] Scales PC, Pekel K, Sethi J, Chamberlain R, Van Boekel M. Academic Year Changes in Student-Teacher Developmental Relationships and Their Linkage to Middle and High School Students' Motivation: A Mixed Methods Study. The Journal of Early Adolescence. 2020;40(4):499-536. doi:10.1177/0272431619858414

Yet, students who did report higher levels of developmental relationships with teachers felt more connected to school, were more motivated to work hard, and had better GPAs, than students whose relationships with teachers did not capture all those elements of developmental relationships. Search Institute also found that when students' experience of developmental relationships increased over the school year, they did better on those educational outcomes than students whose relationships with teachers stayed about the same or got worse.

The Developmental Relationships Framework

The Search Institute has identified five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people's lives. Those elements and actions are referred to as The Developmental Relationships Framework[3]. **Developmental relationships are close connections through which 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.**

ELEMENTS	ACTIONS	DEFINITIONS
Express Care *Show me that I matter to you*	**Be dependable** **Listen** **Believe in me** **Be warm** **Encourage**	→ Be someone I can trust. → Really pay attention when we are together. → Make me feel known and valued. → Show me you enjoy being with me. → Praise me for my efforts and achievements.
Challenge Growth *Push me to keep getting better*	**Expect my best** **Stretch** **Hold me accountable** **Reflect on failures**	→ Expect me to live up to my potential. → Push me to go further. → Insist I take responsibility for my actions. → Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.
Provide Support *Help me complete tasks and achieve goals*	**Navigate** **Empower** **Advocate** **Set boundaries**	→ Guide me through hard situations. → Build my confidence to take charge of my life. → Stand up for me when I need it. → Put in place limits that keep me on track.
Share Power *Treat me with respect and give me a say*	**Respect me** **Include me** **Collaborate goals** **Let me lead**	→ Take me seriously and treat me fairly. → Involve me in decisions that affect me. → Work with me to solve problems and reach goals. → Create opportunities for me to act and lead.
Expand Possibilities *Connect me with people and places that broaden my world*	**Inspire** **Broaden horizons** **Connect**	→ Inspire me to see possibilities for my future. → Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places. → Introduce me to people who can help me grow.

NOTE: Relationships are, by definition, bidirectional, with each person giving and receiving. So each person in a strong relationship both 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.

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

Examples of Relationship Building Approaches

The following are examples of approaches that build stronger developmental relationships.

Express Care Approaches

- **Ask How They Are:** Periodically ask the young person how they are doing, regardless of how they seem to be doing based on external appearances.

- **Really Focus:** Look in the young person's eyes when you talk to them. Focus on them and don't multitask or glance at your phone.

- **Share Your Story:** Tell the young person why you choose to do the work you do with young people. Make clear that you are there because you want to be there.

- **Show Up:** Show up at an event that matters in the young person's life, from competitions to concerts.

- **Express Enjoyment:** Tell the young person that you look forward to the time you spend with them and give a specific reason why.

Challenge Growth Approaches

- **Probe Deeper:** Ask follow-up questions so the young person knows you're genuinely interested in what they are saying and want to help them think more deeply about the subject or issue.

- **Combine Elements:** When you challenge growth, also utilize another element of the Developmental Relationships Framework, such as express care. This helps the young person not experience challenge as entirely negative.

- **Provide Specific Feedback:** Be as specific as possible in giving feedback to a young person. Don't just say "good job." Describe what the young person did well and what they can do better next time.

- **Encourage Critical Thinking:** Ask open-ended questions about young people's lives and the world around them for which there is no "right answer."

Provide Support Approaches

- **Check In:** When you learn that a young person is going through a difficult situation, proactively check in with them about it. Do this rather than waiting for them to bring it up again or for circumstances to force a discussion about the issue.

- **Validate Feelings:** If a young person is struggling with a task in your class or group, ask how they are feeling and validate those feelings even as you encourage them to continue the struggle.

- **Break Down Steps:** Help the young person understand that solving big problems usually requires breaking them down into smaller steps.

- **Indirect Praise:** When a young person has made progress on a difficult task or challenge, mention that progress to their parent or another family member or another person on staff. If word gets back to the young person that you praised them when they weren't around, it can have a very positive impact on the youth.

- **Active Listening:** Repeat back to the young person what you think you heard them say.

- **Wait Time:** Give the young person time to think before you ask them to respond.

Share Power Approaches

- **Share Mistakes or Disappointments:** Tell the young person about a mistake you made in your life, or a time when you failed to attain a goal, and what you learned from it.

- **Let Them Teach:** Encourage, request, or require the young person to teach you something about a subject, skill, or activity they care about.

- **Give Choices:** Provide the young person with choice among a limited set of options, all of which should be good options.

- **Shift Perspective:** When you and the young person disagree about something, take time to understand the young person'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.

Expand Possibilities Approaches

- **Model It:** Talk about experiences that have broadened your horizons, such as education, travel, work experience, or getting to know people who are different from you.

- **Suggest New Things:** Recommend things to watch, listen to, read, or places to visit to gain exposure to new ideas, prompt consideration of different perspectives, and expand a young person's thinking about a particular topic.

- **Connect the Dots:** Demonstrate how what young people are learning or working on relates to their interests and to success outside of the school or program.

- **Reframe Problems:** Help the young person see a negative situation in more positive terms.

Interested in Learning More?

Explore Along's Library to find research-informed questions and resources that support each of the five elements of the Developmental Relationships framework.

Find additional resources and reports on the [Search Institute website](#).