

The Developmental Relationships Framework



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. Young people are more likely to grow up successfully when they experience developmental relationships with important people in their lives. The Search Institute has identified five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people’s lives.

- 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.
- Young people are more likely to grow up successfully when they experience developmental relationships with important people in their lives.
- Developmental relationships are cultivated through five key elements: express care; challenge growth; provide support; share power; and expand possibilities.
- Each key element identifies three or more action steps that support the element.

Express Care: Show Them That They Matter To Others

- **Be dependable**—Be someone they can trust.
- **Listen**—Really pay attention when spending time with them.
- **Believe in me**—Make them feel known and valued.
- **Be warm**—Show them there is joy in being with them.
- **Encourage**—Praise them for their efforts and achievements.

Challenge Growth: Push Them To Keep Getting Better

- **Expect my best**—Expect them to live up to their potential.
- **Stretch**—Push them to go further.
- **Hold me accountable**—Insist they take responsibility for their actions.
- **Reflect on failures**—Help them learn from mistakes and setbacks.

Provide Support: Help Them Complete Tasks And Achieve Goals

- **Navigate**—Guide them through hard situations and systems.
- **Empower**—Build their confidence to take charge of their life.
- **Advocate**—Stand up for them when they need it.
- **Set boundaries**—Put in place limits that keep them on track.

Share Power: Treat Them With Respect And Give Them A Say

- **Respect them**—Take them seriously and treat them fairly.
- **Include them**—Involve them in decisions that affect them.
- **Collaborate**—Work with them to solve problems and reach goals.
- **Let them lead**—Create opportunities for them to take action and lead.



Wheeler

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Expand Possibilities: Connect Them With People And Places That Broaden Their World

- **Inspire**—Inspire them to see possibilities for their future.
- **Broaden horizons**—Expose them to new ideas, experiences, and places.
- **Connect**—Introduce them to people who can help them 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 a young person.

Additional Information About Developmental Relationships

This summary of the five elements and 20 actions in the Developmental Relationships Framework skims the surface of how relationships work in young people’s lives. Keep these ideas in mind as you begin to internalize the framework:

- **Relationships are two-way experiences and commitments.** Because each person contributes to and receives from relationships, these actions can be both initiated and experienced by each person in the relationship. However, the two-way relationship is not always balanced or equal. Adults have particular responsibilities for cultivating relationships with young people. At the same time, it is powerful for young people to recognize that they have opportunities and responsibilities for developing strong relationships with trustworthy peers and adults.
- **Each element and action may be expressed and experienced in different ways.** The differences in expressions and experiences may be based on individual, community, cultural, and other differences. For example, adults demonstrate care for youth based on the nature of their relationship (e.g., parent or caregiver vs. friend vs. teacher), age and personality of the youth, community context and circumstances, and many other factors.
- **Relationships are not all that matters.** Although relationships are vital resources in young people’s development, they do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of a larger system of development that is comprised of relationships, contexts (e.g., norms, opportunities, and stresses), and personal qualities. Each part includes strengths and challenges, and each influences the other parts.
- **The Developmental Relationships Framework builds on the Developmental Assets Framework.** The Search Institute has developed the Developmental Assets Framework, which identifies 40 internal and external assets that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. Assets are built primarily through relationships, and the Developmental Relationships Framework is the tool that fosters asset building in youth. Please see the Connecticut Clearinghouse Fact Sheet, “The Developmental Assets Framework,” for more information on developmental assets.

Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental
Health and Addiction Services
www.ct.gov/DMHAS

CT Department of Children and
Families
www.ct.gov/DCF

National Resources

The Search Institute
www.search-institute.org

Substance Abuse and Mental
Health Services Administration
www.samhsa.gov

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