

State of Developmental Relationships

2025 Annual Report



2025

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The **State of Developmental Relationships** annual report summarizes the analysis of aggregate data from a diverse group of 24,954 young people, as well as youth-serving staff and educators who participated in Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Survey.

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Introduction

It's difficult, if not impossible, to find any positive developmental outcome that isn't shaped by relationships. **Each** and **every** young person needs developmental relationships—the 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.

All young people possess unique strengths, passions, and potential. Yet too often, youth lack access to the critical support they need, and are frequently seen through a deficit-based lens. **Developmental Relationships** are a strengths-based approach to supporting young people as they grow and navigate the challenges and opportunities that life holds.

A vision of thriving for young people sets a goal that focuses on meaningful engagement and inspiration, rather than merely avoiding pitfalls or achieving specific milestones. While developing essential social and emotional skills is crucial for thriving, these skills should not be the ultimate objective. Thriving involves the mutual growth of young individuals and their communities. It occurs when young people identify their passions, are supported in cultivating a sense of purpose, and have access to supportive people, environments, and opportunities to further develop strengths that enable them to contribute positively to the world.

Thriving encompasses personal growth, in areas like identity, wellbeing, and purpose, while also furthering a community of support. It is inherently tied to an individual's context, as the skills, character, and relationships necessary for thriving depend on the dynamic fit between the person and their environment. Faced with the myriad of programs, apps, toolkits, and guides available, it can feel overwhelming, leading to the notion that we must "try harder" or do more to support young people. However, it is crucial to remember the fundamental difference that truly impacts young people, supported by extensive research and practical experience: **relationships are at the core of this work.**

"When you have a teacher who's very forthcoming and is very like, 'here's where you guys are. I love that you guys are reading this. This is really interesting. I want to learn more about it.' [...] When you have people who are willing to talk to each other and engaging and are really interested and really craving for that education, it creates this really beautiful belonging sense."

-Student

Relationships: The Enhancer

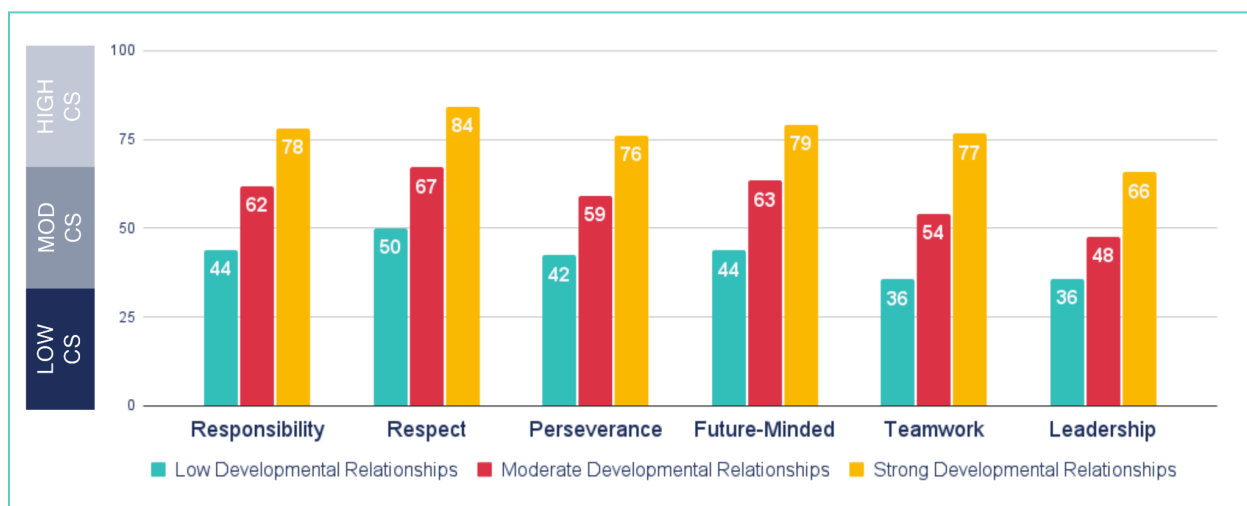
How Relationships Shape Youth Development

Youth on thriving pathways have opportunities that help cultivate personal strengths like perseverance and responsibility, as well as interpersonal strengths like teamwork and respect for others. These are all important aspects of character development. Developing strong character helps prepare us to face challenges and make decisions that align with our values. A strong sense of character also encourages civic engagement and positive contributions to the people and places around us.

Young people who experience strong developmental relationships consistently report higher levels of character strengths. They feel more prepared to lead and persevere, they respect and collaborate with others, they uphold commitments and take responsibility for their actions, and they think about how their decisions will impact the future.

Character Strengths

Young people with stronger developmental relationships reported higher levels of character strengths (CS).

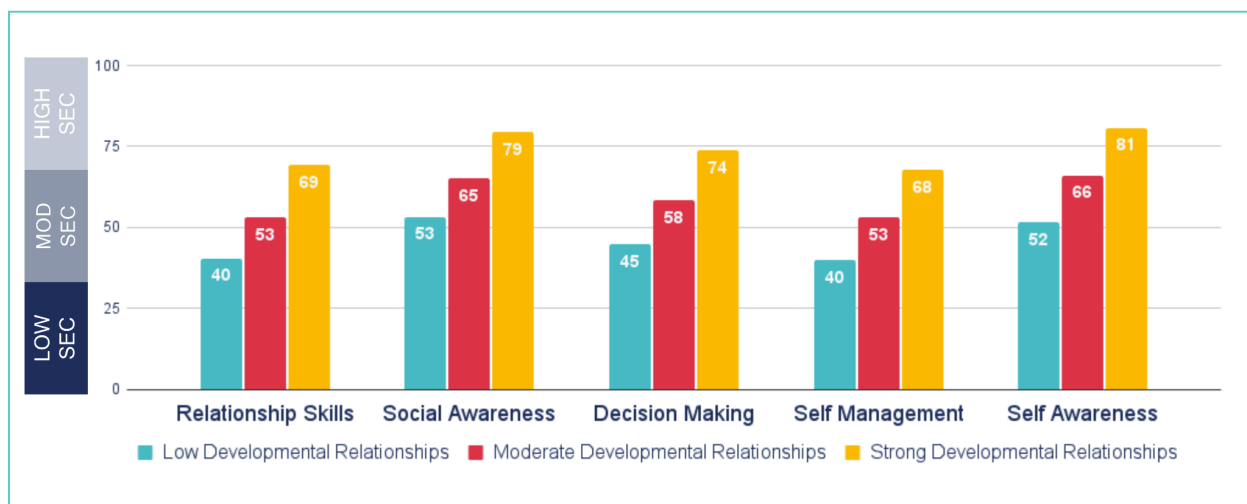


Scores are placed on a 0-100 continuum with 100 being the strongest.

In addition to supporting character strengths, when youth experience strong developmental relationships they also experience higher levels of social and emotional competencies. They are tuned into the needs of others and work well in teams, they recognize and reflect on their feelings, strengths, and growth areas, and hold themselves accountable for their decisions and actions.

Social-Emotional Competencies

Young people with stronger developmental relationships reported higher levels of social-emotional competencies.



Scores are placed on a 0-100 continuum with 100 being the strongest.

Leveraging Relationships to Unlock Resources and Opportunities

Developmental relationships aren't just important for supporting young people in the moment. They can also create bridges to new experiences and resources that help youth work towards larger life goals. We know that developmental relationships are most powerful when youth experience all five elements. However, of all the elements, young people (and the adults who work with them) consistently say that they experience expanding possibilities the least.

Expanding possibilities is about connecting youth with people and places that broaden their world. This is critical for building **social capital**, or a web of supportive relationships that can help open doors to resources we need as we pursue our educational, career, and other life goals. In addition to supporting progress toward education and career goals, high levels of social capital are related to stronger feelings of self-efficacy and a deeper commitment to helping others.



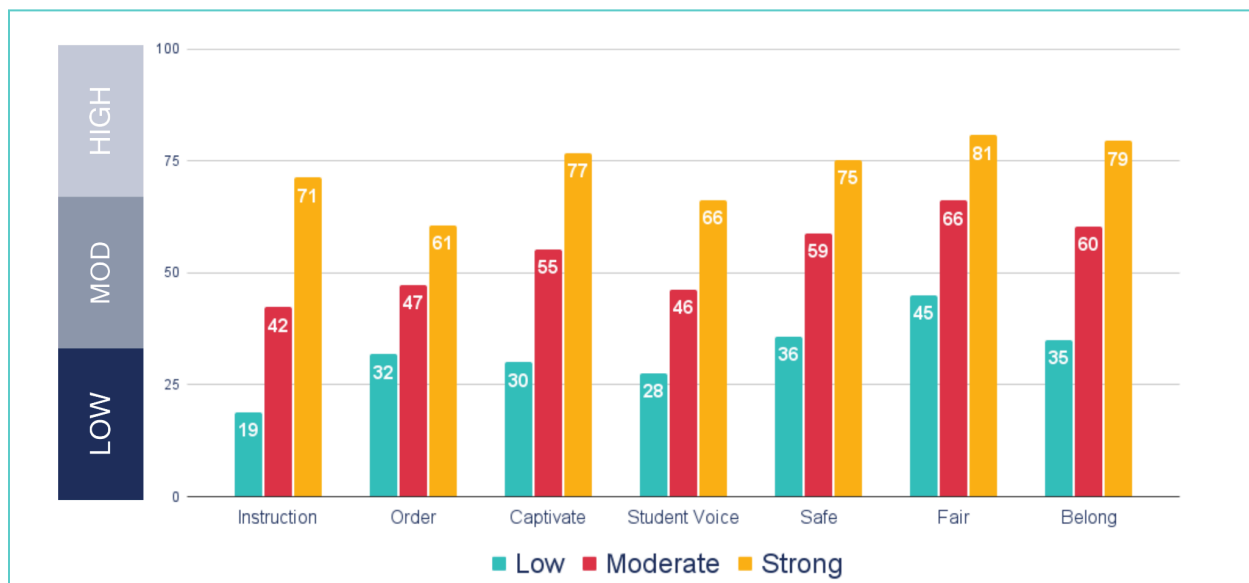
How is your organization supporting social capital today? Are there areas of opportunity to explore? Search Institute's Youth Opportunity Toolkit is a free tool designed to help schools and youth organizations gain insight into the benefits of social capital while introducing the key components to support leaders, educators and practitioners in getting started on a pathway to becoming a social capital promoting organization. [Explore the toolkit.](#)

Understanding the Impact of Context on Relationships

Relationships play an essential role in students' everyday experiences in school. Positive, supportive climates in schools and classrooms are important for promoting a culture of inclusivity, fostering engagement, and nurturing student success. Young people who experience strong developmental relationships consistently find their classroom climates more positive compared to students who experience moderate or low developmental relationships. Students say their classrooms feel safe, fair and engaging, and that teachers use helpful and relevant instructional practices. Students also feel their voices are heard, which connects to the element of sharing power.

Classroom Climate Indicators

Young people with strong developmental relationships reported stronger classroom climates.



Scores are placed on a 0-100 continuum with 100 being the strongest.

In addition to experiencing positive classroom climates, students who experience strong developmental relationships are much more likely than their peers with low or moderate relationships to report that their school values affirm and respect their cultural background. Students who have strong developmental relationships and a culturally responsive school environment report the highest levels of social-emotional competencies; these positive associations are further enhanced in the context of supportive classroom climates.

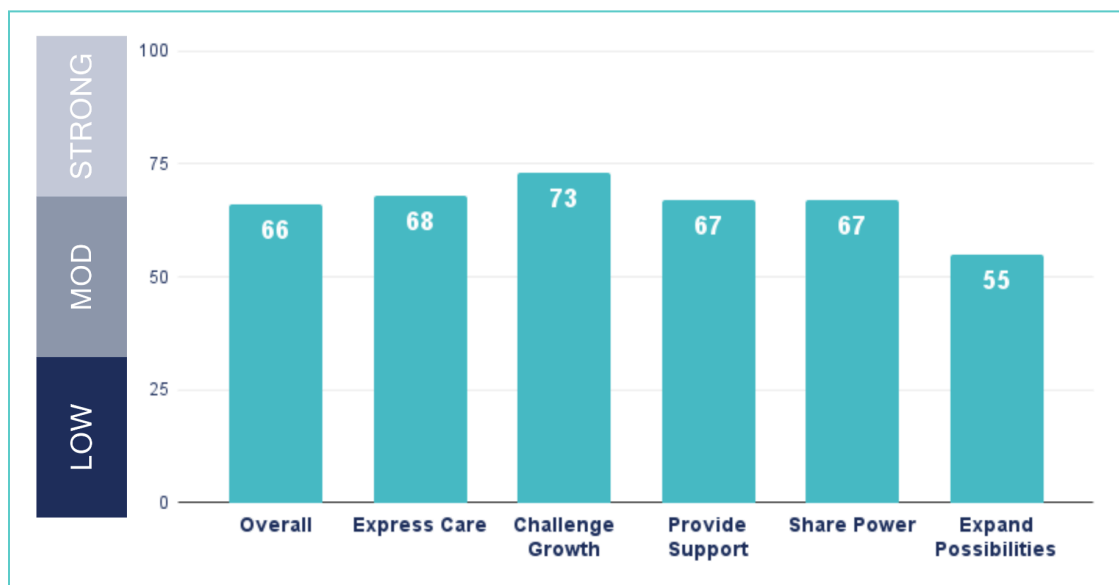
Ripples and Waves

As Individuals we Create Ripples

When we look more closely at the relational actions that support each element, we can see which actions youth experience the most and least often. The large majority of young people feel the adults in their lives are dependable and treat them with respect. They believe that adults expect the best from them, offer guidance and boundaries for their behavior, and hold them accountable for their actions. While these actions span multiple elements, they largely correspond with the two elements youth experience most: challenge growth and express care.

Young People's Experience

Youth report moderate levels of developmental relationships overall, with Challenge Growth being the strongest and Expand Possibilities the lowest element.



Scores are placed on a 0-100 continuum with 100 being the strongest.

On the other hand, three relational actions that expand possibilities—helping youth imagine possible futures, discover new interests, and build connections to resources—rank at the bottom of the list. Expanding possibilities is the element that youth experience least often, and nearly one-third of youth have “expand possibilities” scores that fall in the “low” range. Two other actions—including youth in decisions and letting them lead—round out the bottom five. These actions are part of “sharing power,” which is the second least-experienced element.

“Share power is one of the ones that’s hardest for me. And I’ve had to be a lot more intentional with it. Because when I was thinking about it and when I’ve been trying to share power more in my everyday work and with the youth, respect is a huge one— that their voice feels also heard, and I’m taking them seriously. So I have to look at it as to step away from being a control freak sometimes... that you’re showing respect to another individual and how that could potentially make them feel and help them on their journey in leadership.”

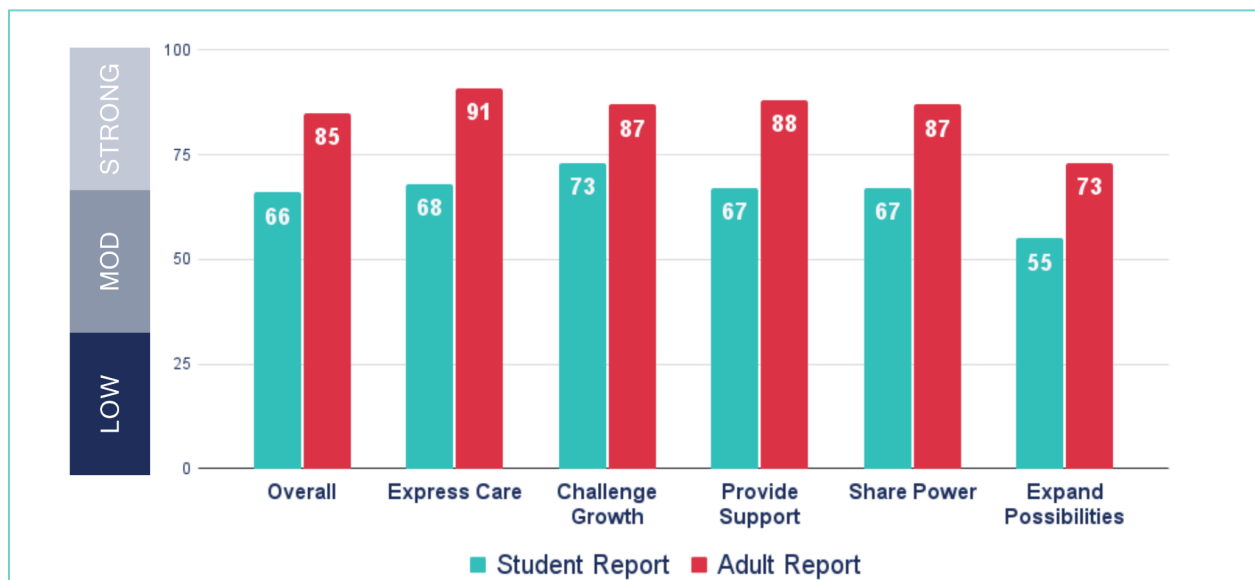
–Youth-Serving Practitioner

While all five relational elements are important, actions that expand possibilities help youth cultivate social capital. Having access to a web of relationships can amplify the effects of a single relationship, so it is critical that we find ways to connect youth to new people, experiences, and resources. In addition, sharing power can foster a sense of agency and help youth understand and activate their capacity to contribute to the people and places around them. When youth are thriving—feeling good about who they are, living into their values, and taking steps to make change—we all benefit.

Perception Gap and Opportunity

The data also tells us that adults aren’t perceiving relationships in the same way that young people are, this provides a unique opportunity for reflection and action.

A perception gap existed between young people and adults across all relational elements, but was most pronounced in Express Care.



Scores are placed on a 0-100 continuum with 100 being the strongest.

Together, We Make Waves

We know that each and every young person needs to experience strong developmental relationships. One way of ensuring this is to intentionally work towards building a strong “relational ecosystem.” Imagine if a young person could enter any youth-serving space—a school, a community center, a social service program, a job training—and could expect to encounter adults who believed in that young person’s capacity and understood the power of developmental relationships. That kind of strong relational ecosystem makes it more likely that each and every young person has what they need to thrive.

Our partners across the country are living this work daily. As one example, **UP Partnership’s Excel Beyond the Bell** is a professional learning network designed to ensure that young people in Bexar County, Texas have access to high-quality youth development programs and to developmental relationships. Our collaboration with UP Partnership has brought developmental relationships training into their community of practice, and youth development practitioners see the value in a strong network.

“...it’s helped by just seeing that other people are out there doing the work and also that everyone’s contributing, that the world’s just not necessarily falling on my shoulders, that it’s a shared experience and we’re all out here doing what we can to help serve San Antonio’s youth and community.”

–Youth-Serving Practitioner



During the 2025 State of Relationships Webinar, Search Institute’s partners from **Partnership4Success** and **Minnetonka Public Schools** shared their wisdom and experiences as they make waves in their communities. **Watch the recording on demand.**

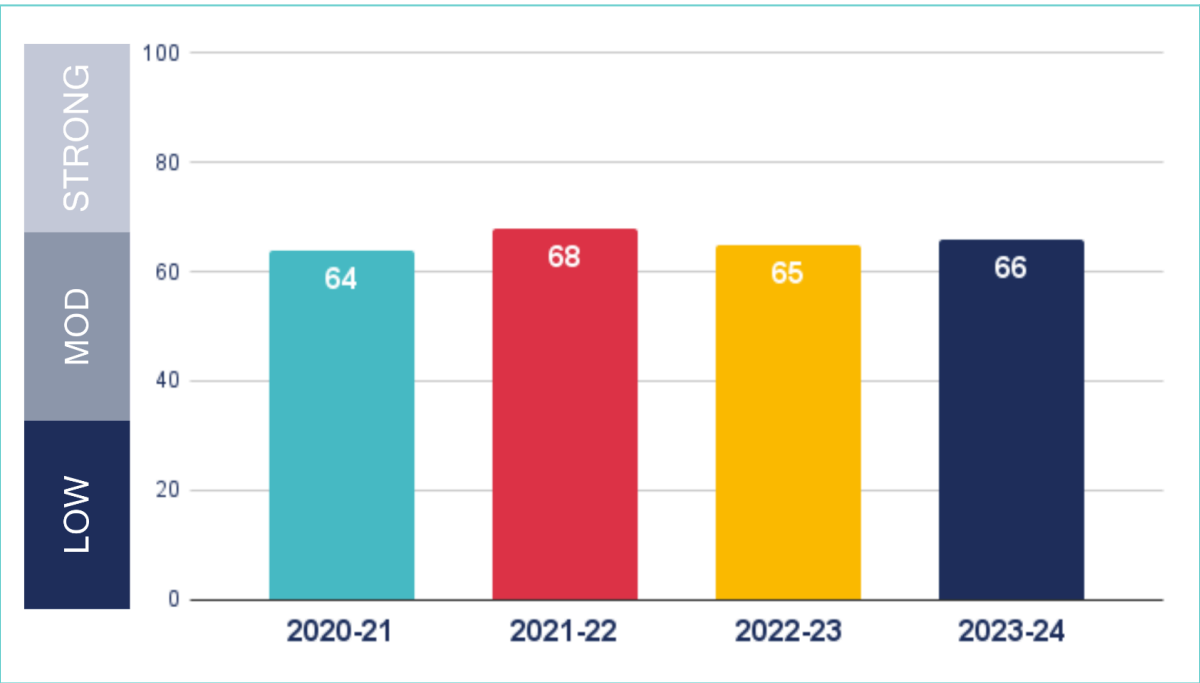
Relationships Require Commitment and Care

Nurturing Resilience and Growth

Strong developmental relationships are pivotal in shaping the trajectory of young individuals as they navigate the multifaceted moments of their lives. These relationships must be rooted in an understanding and appreciation of the diverse identities, cultures, and experiences that each and every young person brings to the table. In schools, programs and community spaces, adults play a crucial role in providing guidance and support that is both responsive and adaptable to the unique circumstances of each young person. By fostering an environment of trust and respect, adults can help young people feel valued and understood, encouraging them to explore their potential and develop resilience in the face of challenges.

Intentional Focus and Ongoing Commitment

During the 2023-24 academic year, youth reported moderate levels of overall developmental relationships. This moderate level has remained relatively steady since the decrease we saw overall in developmental relationships during COVID-19 Pandemic (2020-21).



Scores are placed on a 0-100 continuum with 100 being the strongest.

As conditions influencing well-being and development evolve, it becomes increasingly important to remain flexible and responsive to the changing needs of young people. This requires a commitment to ongoing reflection and adaptation, ensuring that the strategies employed are relevant and effective. By staying attuned to the shifting dynamics of the environments in which young people operate, we can better support their growth and development. This dynamic approach not only enhances the quality of developmental relationships but also empowers young people to thrive in a world that is constantly in flux, equipping them with the skills and confidence needed to navigate their futures successfully.

Measuring what Matters

By regularly assessing the quality and strength of the relationships, we can identify where young individuals feel a sense of belonging and where improvements can be made, in other words, measuring relationships becomes a critical approach for understanding and enhancing the experiences and connections that shape young people's lives. This is not merely about identifying deficiencies; it's also about recognizing and nurturing the existing strengths within these relationships. By focusing on both the gaps and the strengths, we can create a more inclusive environment that fosters meaningful connections, ensuring that every young person feels valued and supported.

Data can be a catalyst for action, guiding efforts to not only address areas of improvement, but also to amplify the positive aspects of youth-adult interactions. Investing in tools and practices that measure relational quality over time is essential for sustaining environments where young people can thrive. These investments ensure that we are not just reacting to problems as they arise, but are proactively creating spaces where each and every young person is recognized for their inherent value. By doing so, we lay the groundwork for a future where young people have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential, supported by strong, nurturing relationships with the adults in their lives.



For more than 30 years, Search Institute has helped organizations worldwide gather data on Developmental Relationships and Assets, surveying over 100,000 young people annually. Surveys like the **Developmental Relationships Survey**, aid youth-serving organizations and schools in achieving diverse goals, by providing actionable data to enhance programs and impact youth development. **[Learn more about our measurement tools.](#)**

Together for Thriving Youth

Our hope for young people is that they grow into resilient, engaged, and purposeful individuals who can navigate the complexities of life with confidence. Developmental relationships serve as a powerful enhancer in this journey, acting as catalysts that amplify and nurture the potential within each and every young person. These relationships extend beyond the individual to impact families, communities, and society at large. It is crucial to recognize that developmental relationships are not a one-time effort; they require ongoing commitment and nurturing to truly flourish.

In order to effectively foster these relationships, we must understand that they are a continuous process of growth and support. There is an urgent need to create environments where young people feel valued and empowered, ensuring that they have the tools and opportunities to make meaningful contributions. By doing so, we can collectively build a world where each and every young person has the chance to realize their full potential and leave a lasting, positive imprint on the world.

Get Started Today

- Assess where your relationships with young people are strong and where they can grow. Take the **Relationship Check**, this self-reflection tool will help you gain insights on your relationships with important young people in your life.
- The **Relational Culture Checkup** will help you identify what your organization is doing well and uncover areas for improvement. It will also help you reflect on the core mindsets, skills, practices, and supporting structures needed to cultivate and sustain a **relationship-rich culture**.
- Transformation calls for new ways of thinking and collaboration, partnerships to drive the innovation needed to address today's complex challenges: **Together for Thriving Youth**.

"It is impossible for any one adult to be all things to all youth at all times, but as a community we can."

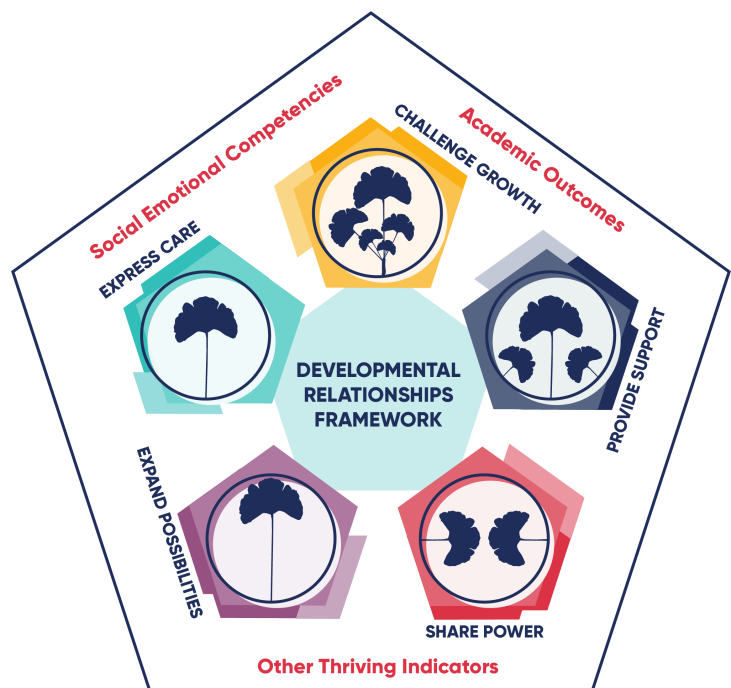
-Dr. Ben Houltberg, CEO, Search Institute

About the Report

The **State of Developmental Relationships** is an annual report that provides a comprehensive overview of the latest trends and insights into young people's developmental relationships. Search Institute is committed to inspiring action across youth support ecosystems—the various environments, relationships, and resources that contribute to the growth and well-being of young people. Our work lives in the dynamic intersection of scientific research, practitioner wisdom, and youth voice, with a commitment to expand the collective knowledge of what young people need to thrive.

Developmental Relationships

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. The **Developmental Relationships Framework** identifies five elements—with 20 specific relational actions—that make up developmental relationships. Relational actions are the specific behaviors and interactions that make these elements come to life. When young people experience these relationships in their families, schools, programs, and communities, they are more likely to be resilient in the face of challenges and grow up thriving.



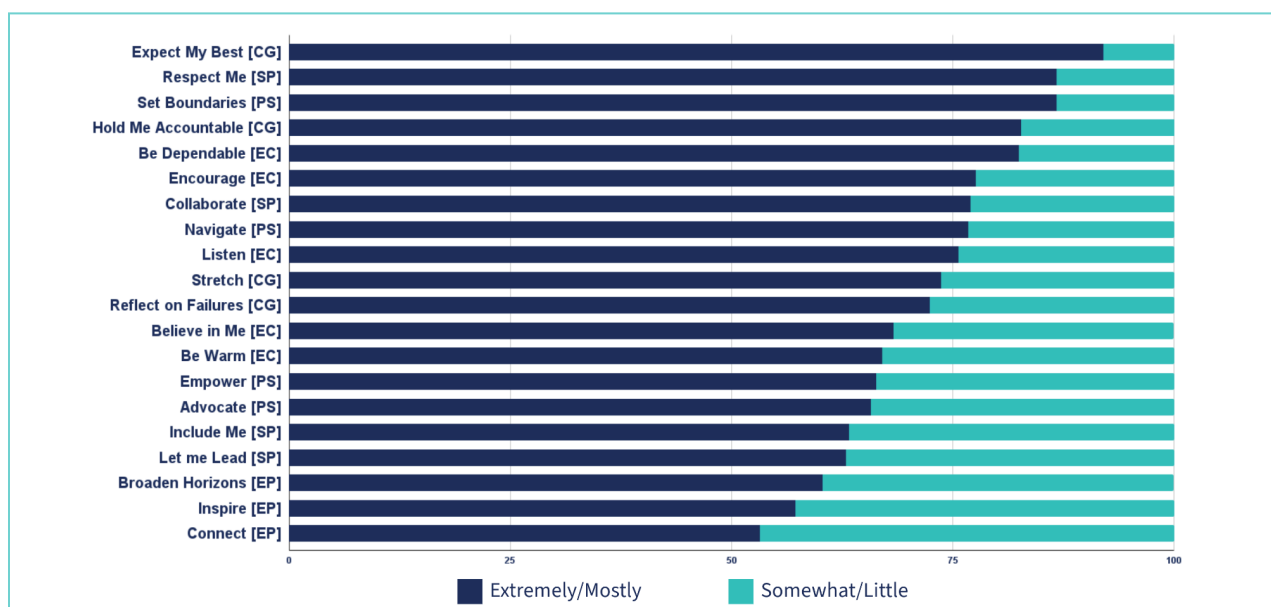
An Action-Oriented Tool

It is important to point out that developmental relationships are dynamic, bi-directional, and contextualized. Additionally, the five elements are interrelated and not meant to be comprehensive. There are likely many elements and actions at any given time that could describe a developmental relationship. Our framework describes the five elements and actions that emerged as core to meeting the developmental needs of youth and promoting youth thriving. It is not meant to capture the totality of developmental relationships but to serve as an action-oriented framework for cultivating critical elements of developmental relationships that promote positive youth development.

Developmental relationships are a key to cultivating a sense of belonging for youth. Every young person should have the opportunity to experience all of the relational actions identified in the Developmental Relationships Framework somewhere in their relational ecosystem.

Strengthening Young People’s Perceptions at the Relational Action Level

When we look more closely at the relational actions that support each element, we can see which actions youth experience the most and least often.



Scores are placed on a 0-100 continuum with 100 being “extremely likely” to experience the relational action
 [EC] Express Care, [CG] Challenge Growth, [PS] Provide Support, [SP] Share Power, [EP] Expand Possibilities

The Developmental Relationships Framework provides the opportunity for us all to improve in one or more elements at any given time in our work with young people. While all five relational elements are important, focusing on the relational actions young people are experiencing the least represents an opportunity for how we can be more intentional in our efforts to cultivate developmental relationships with young people.



The **Resources Hub** is a research-based collection of free tools, activities, measures, and other resources designed to support you in helping every young person succeed and thrive. Through the Resources Hub, educators, youth-serving practitioners, managers, and leaders have access to a myriad of resources ranging from self- and organizational assessments, to frameworks for building Developmental Relationships that can be embedded in daily practice, as well as research briefs that inform how to approach Developmental Relationships and build a relationship-rich environment where young people can thrive.

Demographics

These data were independently collected in schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs (supervised programs in the school or community that youth attend outside of the regular school day) across the United States. This report represents a diverse sample of 24,954 young people, as well as youth-serving staff and educators who participated in Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Survey during the 2023-24 academic year.

| Demographics ¹ | | % of Sample | Developmental Relationship Scores | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------|-----|
| | | | Strong | Moderate | Low |
| Gender | Female | 49% | 40% | 52% | 9% |
| | Male | 48% | 38% | 52% | 9% |
| | Nonbinary/ Self-Describe | 3% | 27% | 56% | 18% |
| | | | | | |
| Race/ Ethnicity | Asian | 11% | 40% | 53% | 7% |
| | Black | 4% | 37% | 51% | 12% |
| | Latino/a/x | 31% | 35% | 53% | 12% |
| | Native | <1% | 42% | 46% | 13% |
| | White | 33% | 42% | 50% | 8% |
| | Other | 11% | 42% | 49% | 8% |
| | Multiracial | 7% | 34% | 56% | 11% |
| | | | | | |
| Grade | 4 | 7% | 50% | 45% | 5% |
| | 5 | 7% | 49% | 46% | 5% |
| | 6 | 9% | 47% | 46% | 7% |
| | 7 | 9% | 37% | 53% | 10% |
| | 8 | 9% | 30% | 56% | 14% |
| | 9 ² | 41% | 33% | 57% | 10% |
| | 10 | 7% | 30% | 60% | 10% |
| | 11 | 6% | 31% | 57% | 12% |
| | 12 | 6% | 34% | 53% | 13% |

¹ The demographics table includes valid percentages. Missing or invalid data points have been removed.

² The 9th-grade sample size includes a study of a 9th-grade transition program during the 2023-2024 academic year.



About Search Institute

We collaborate with schools and youth-serving organizations to conduct applied research, co-design solutions, and create an environment where each and every young person can thrive. Through professional learning experiences, surveys, measurement tools, and support for continuous improvement, we build capacity and inspire change.

Search Institute

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