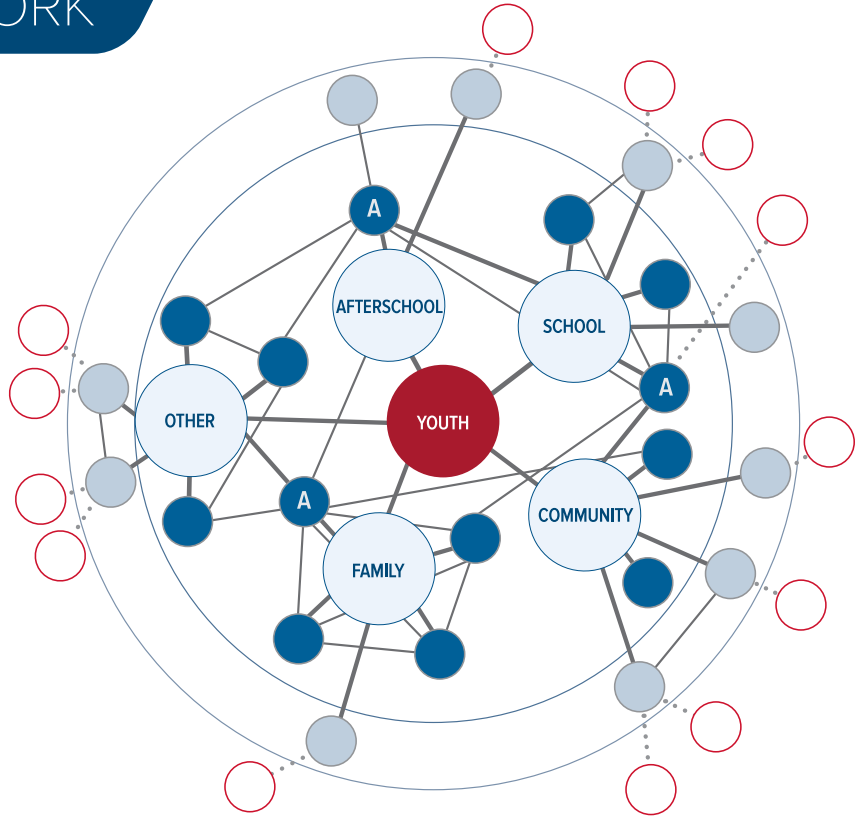


USING THE WEB OF SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

Youth grow, learn, and develop through relationships.¹

They exchange all the social support and social capital they need throughout their lives in relationships with adults and peers, institutions, and policies.² Ample research has connected positive youth-adult relationships with improvements in academic, behavioral, social, employment, and mental health outcomes for youth.³ One way to think about the relationships present in a young person’s life is through a **web of support**.⁴

A web of support represents **all** of the **relationships** and **resources** in a young person’s life, and how they all fit together. Understanding who is present in a young person’s web and the supports they offer can help provide a more holistic understanding of a young person’s ecosystem that is not specific to certain programs or places.



Important structures within a web of support

- **Actors:** Each person a young person interacts with can represent an “actor” in their web. For example, parents, teachers, and bus drivers.
- **Strong ties:** Relationships with actors who usually provide multiple types of support and have long lasting, enduring relationships with the young person (e.g., older sibling, neighbor, family friend).
- **Weak ties:** Relationships with actors who provide important support like bridging social capital but less support than strong ties. Relationships are less enduring (e.g., 6th grade teacher).
- **Relationship cores:** Clusters of strong ties represent a “core” within different contexts in the webs. For example, a home core might include a mother, father, and siblings, but not extended family members.
- **Social support:** The emotional, informational, instrumental (practical), and validation (affirmation) support youth can gain from interactions with actors in the web.
- **Social capital:** The bonding (psychological) and bridging (expanding network and information) resources youth can exchange with others in the web.

Webs of support can be utilized to organize programs, policies, and research in a way that acknowledges the existence of multiple relationships in young people’s lives and the importance of understanding the alignment of those relationships and available resources. Understanding who is in this constellation of relationships can identify leverage points for helping a young person (e.g., a teacher or extended family member who provides essential emotional support throughout the year) and areas that need more support (e.g., instrumental support navigating the college admissions process).

BEST PRACTICES FOR USING WEBS OF SUPPORT AS A FRAMEWORK

Include youth

Research has shown youth can intentionally engage or disengage from adults and resources. Youth can therefore be active in building and maintaining their webs and should be engaged in the identification of their webs and programming to support their webs.

Involve all adults in the building/program

All adults have the potential to provide at least one or more supports to young people. Identify what supports all adults feel they can provide/are providing, which adults want to do more, and what more each adult can do in their current interactions with youth.

Foster collaboration within the web

Interconnectivity among actors is important for the young person to build resilience to change. Fostering connection between adults can better equip each adult with the knowledge necessary to support young people towards their goals.

Map multiple times

Webs are dynamic and the structure and actors change over time depending on developmental needs, individual characteristics, and context. For example, sociohistorical context is important for cross-race supportive youth-adult relationships. Map webs in a way that acknowledges there isn’t a single type of web that every young person should have, and youth webs are subject to change as youth grow.

Leverage anchor relationships

Some relationships rise above the rest if they provide comprehensive sources of support to become anchors for youth, for example, formal mentors. Understand for which youth providing even one essential support would be the tipping point between them interrupting their path or reaching their goals and for which youth several supports are needed.

Ask different questions

If adults understand that they are already in the webs of every young person they meet, the question changes from “How can I help you” to “If I already know I am having some kind of impact on your life, how can I work with you to have a greater impact that is more aligned with your strengths, needs, and goals”?

RELATIONSHIP MAPPING

The best way to visualize a young person's web of support is through relationship mapping. This can be done by hand or on an electronic device like a phone or tablet. Mapping webs of support can be used to see:

- who youth go to for support currently
- what kind of support youth get from their networks
- how much youth trust each actor
- how youth connect with each actor
- who in youth's network know each other and interact regularly
- where more support is needed

Relationship mapping with youth⁵

SAMPLE PROMPT

"We are going to spend some time now talking about some of the people you know. I would like to get an idea of which family and friends and other people you feel have been most important to you and most helpful. To begin with, I am going to ask who you spend time with and who you turn to for different kinds of help. You can give me just their first names or their initials if you wish, and I will write them down on this list. Again, think carefully of the people you feel have been important to you for help or for spending time with. So think now about the important people in your life. Do you have any questions?"

HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF RELATIONSHIP MAPPING

- Go setting by setting, e.g., "Let's start with school. Who do you spend time with at school?"
- Have participant write the name of adult/peer down on the map in the appropriate setting.
- Ask the young person how close they feel to the adult (on a scale of 1-5) and what support(s) the adult provides.
- For each adult they place, ask them about why they placed them where they did. Example prompts:
 - Tell me about why X is a 4? What is it about X that makes you feel that close to him or her?
 - You placed X at 3 and Y at 5, can you tell me about how those two are different from each other? How are your relationships with these two adults different?
 - If there are no adults that are rated low (i.e. if everyone is a 3 or above) ask "Are there any adults in any of these settings who you'd say you are not close to, like a 1 or a 2?"
- Start the map with adults, and then move to peers. For youth with a lot of adults or peers on the map, you can ask them to group them. For example, you can ask if they have a group of cousins who they feel equally close to, they can put "cousins" and indicate how many cousins there are. Same with friends from a particular context, etc.
- If the map isn't too crowded, have participant draw lines connecting people to others they know.
- Discuss existing support with youth. Example questions: *Where do you feel you are most supported? How do you feel about the support you get from (ask about various actors) your web?*
- Work with youth to identify gaps of support in their webs. Example questions: *Where might you need more support? What do you hope to gain from that support? Are there folks who are not already connected that you would like to see connected?*
- Brainstorm strategies for gaining new relationships or improving new relationships with youth. Example questions: *What are some ideas that you have for expanding your network? Are there folks in your life you did not add to your map but would like to form a better relationship with? What relationships would you like to strengthen?*

LEARN MORE

- Read about the decades of youth-adult relationships research that informed this framework in these previous publications from the authors and the [Center for Promise: *Webs of Support, Creating Sustainable Career Pathways for Disconnected Youth, Turning Points, Relationships Come First, Moving Beyond Academics: The Role of Adult Capacity*](#), and [Don't Quit on Me](#).
- See the [Clayton Christensen Institute's resource](#) for strategies on building and strengthening youth networks for thriving in work, school, and life.
- To understand more about specific actions that make each relationship stronger for young people see [Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework](#).
- Review resources from [MENTOR](#) for strategies on providing more comprehensive support to youth in formal, natural, or youth-initiated mentoring relationships, such as their [Elements of Effective Practice](#) report and Mentoring Mindset framework (prepublication).

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lieberman, 2013; Varga & Zaff, 2018
- 2 Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner et al., 2015; Zaff et al., 2016
- 3 Chu et al. 2010; Gaddis, 2012; Kao & Rutherford 2007; Sanchez, Colon-Torres, Feuer, Roundfield, & Berardi, 2014; Yu, Johnson, Deutsch, & Varga, 2016
- 4 Center for Promise, 2015; Keller 2005; Keller & Blakeslee, 2014; Schwartz & Rhodes 2016; Spencer et al. 2011; Varga & Zaff, 2018
- 5 Adapted from Futch Ehrlich, Deutsch, Varga, Fox, & Johnson, 2016

REFERENCES

- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In R. M. Lerner (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., Vol. 1). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Center for Promise. (2015). *Don't quit on me: What young people who left school say about the power of relationships*. Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance.
- Chu, P. S., Saucier, D. A., & Hafner, E. (2010). Meta-analysis of the relationships between social support and well-being in children and adolescents. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 29*(6), 624–645.
- Futch Ehrlich, V. A., Deutsch, N. L., Varga, S. M., Fox, C. V., & Johnson, H. E. (2016). Leveraging relational assets for adolescent development: A qualitative investigation of youth-adult 'connection' in positive youth development. *Journal of Qualitative Psychology*.
- Gaddis, S. M. (2012). What's in a Relationship? An examination of social capital, race and class in mentoring relationships. *Social Forces, 90*(4), 1237–1269.
- Kao, G., & Rutherford, L. (2007). Does social capital still matter? Immigrant minority disadvantage in school-specific social capital and its effects on academic achievement. *Sociological Perspective, 50*, 27–52.
- Keller, T. E. (2005). A systemic model of the youth mentoring intervention. *Journal of Primary Prevention, 26*, 169–188.
- Keller, T. E., & Blakeslee, J. E. (2014). Social networks and mentoring. In D. L. Dubois & M. K. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of youth mentoring* (pp. 63–82). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Bowers, E. P., & Geldhof, G. J. (2015). Positive youth development and relational developmental systems. In W. F. Overton & P. C. Molenaar (Eds.), *Theory and method: Volume 1 of the Handbook of child psychology and developmental science* (7th edn., pp. 607–651). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Lieberman, M. (2013). *Social*. New York, NY: Crown.
- Sanchez, B., Colon-Torres, Y., Feuer, R., Roundfield, K. E., & Berardi, L. (2014). Race, ethnicity and culture in mentoring relationships. In D. L. Dubois & M. K. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of youth mentoring* (pp. 145–158). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Schwartz, S. E. O., & Rhodes, J. E. (2016). From treatment to empowerment: New approaches to youth mentoring. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 58*, 150–157.
- Spencer, R., Basualdo-Delmonico, A., & Lewis, T. O. (2011). Working to make it work: The role of parents in the youth mentoring process. *Journal of Community Psychology, 39*, 51–59.
- Varga, S. M., & Zaff, J. F. (2018). Webs of support: An integrative framework of relationships, social networks, and social support. *Adolescent Research Review, 3*(1), 1-11.
- Yu, M. B., Johnson, H. E., Deutsch, N. L., & Varga, S. M. (2016). "She calls me by my last name": Exploring adolescent perceptions of positive teacher-student relationships. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 1*–31.
- Zaff, E. Pufall Jones, A. E. Donlan & S. Anderson (Eds.), *Comprehensive community initiatives for positive youth development* (pp. 1–12). New York, NY: Routledge.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Varga, S. M., & Zaff, J. F. (2021). *Using the Web of Support Framework*. Boston, MA: CERES Institute for Children & Youth.



The CERES Institute for Children & Youth at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development is dedicated to community-engaged research and evaluation. Our work is premised on the belief that the best solutions for strengthening programs for children, youth, and families emerge by authentically partnering the expertise in communities with the expertise of community-engaged researchers and evaluators. Through a co-constructive process, communities and community-engaged

researchers can identify the core problems that young people are facing, design solutions that capitalize on the inherent assets of young people and their communities, and continually learn and improve on these solutions until positive education and life outcomes are realized for all. Importantly, these partnerships should result in community-based organizations building their internal capacity to learn and improve.

CONNECT WITH US

ceresinstitute.org

[@CERESInstitute](https://twitter.com/CERESInstitute)

ceres@bu.edu