

YOUTH WORK FUNDAMENTALS: RELATIONSHIP BUILDING BETWEEN ADULTS AND YOUTH

A Briefing Paper for Afterschool Professionals



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For many years, there has been a drive to improve the quality of afterschool programs and with it has come the expansion of literature, research, and tools to help aid afterschool leaders on their road to improvement. However, as decades of research and experience has shown, there are a few fundamentals of quality youth work that are unchanged over time. This briefing paper focuses on one youth work fundamental: relationship building between adults and youth.

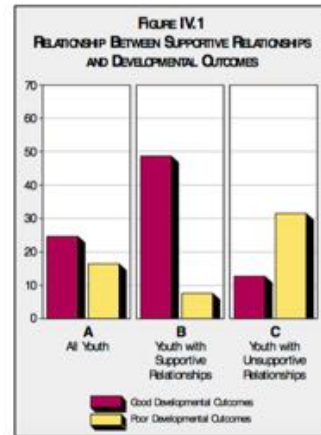
Supportive relationships are critical ‘mediums’ of development. They provide an environment of reinforcement, good modeling, and constructive feedback for physical, intellectual, and social growthⁱ.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

There is overwhelming evidence of the positive influence that comes from the presence of caring, supportive adults in a young person’s life. The presence of healthy youth-adult relationships is the leading indicator that young people will be healthy and productive adults regardless of their economic circumstances and other risk factors.

According to the California Department of Education, close relationships with adults who provide consistent nurturance strengthen children’s capacity to learn and develop. Establishing close relationships with adults is related to children’s emotional security, sense of self, and evolving understanding of the world around them.ⁱⁱ

In a paper written by Michelle Alberti Gambone, Adena Klem, & James Connell, the authors take the concept of relationships one step further by specifically noting the impact of “experiencing support from the people in one’s environment” has on later functioning. They state, “Relationships with both adults and peers are the source of the emotional support, guidance and instrumental help that are critical to young people’s capacity to feel connected to others, navigate day-to-day life and engage in productive activities.” See Figure IV.1.



Youth who experienced high-quality relationships with adults at the beginning of high school were 56. percent less likely to have difficulty with developmental outcomes at the end of high schoolⁱⁱⁱ.

With the goal of afterschool programs being to improve the lives of the young people in their program, it is no wonder *Relationship Building* has continued to be a foundation for quality programs. By providing opportunities for relationship building, afterschool programs ensure they are contributing to the important developmental needs of the young people they serve.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RELATIONSHIP BUILDING? WHAT IS A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP?

There are many different ways to build relationships with young people – positive and negative. As described in *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, “Young people develop positive personal and social assets in settings that include...opportunities for adolescents to experience supportive adult relationships that provide emotional and moral support.”^{iv} When positive relationship building is taking place, young people voice feeling “known” and “supported” by the adults in the program. Further, those young people are more likely to turn to those adults for personal guidance and assistance; the afterschool program becomes a place where these young people receive emotional and practical encouragement.

“A positive relationship can be shared between any two people who love, support, encourage, and help each other practically as well as emotionally. In no particular order, people in healthy relationships tend to:

- Listen to each other
- Communicate openly and without judgment
- Trust and respect each other
- Consistently make time for each other
- Remember details about each other’s lives
- Engage in healthy activities together”^v

Afterschool programs should support positive relationships between adults and young people by 1) demonstrating knowledge of what is going on in the young persons life, neighborhood, school, 2) give full attention to the young person when talking, and 3) give attention and assist individual young people when they are having a problem.^{vi}

WHAT AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS CAN DO TO ENCOURAGE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING BETWEEN ADULTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

Afterschool Program Practices

There are many ways of encouraging relationship building within your afterschool program. First, we are going to focus on best practices that Site Coordinators, Program Leaders, and individual afterschool personnel can bring to their program to help promote positive relationships.

Make Relationship Building Between Adults and Young People a Priority

Many individual educators and youth workers know intuitively that building strong, positive relationships with youth is one of the most important things they do. But, is there value placed on this at the program level? Program leaders and staff should be aware of the importance relationships bring to young people's learning and greater development. Relationship building should be an explicit program objective and be reflected in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the afterschool program and staff.

Allocate Time for Relationship Building Between Adults and Young People

Allocate time in program staff meetings to discuss strategy. Further, allocate time specifically for building these relationships throughout your program. Does the daily schedule of activities allow for opportunities for relationships to develop? Is there time for participants and adults to get to know one another? Consider adopting small group discussions and one-to-one contact with adults.

Each Young Person has One Adult who Know Him/Her Well

An ongoing part of encouraging relationship building is making sure that everyone is connected in some way. Young people need to have a positive relationship with an adult to get the most out of the program. At a staff meeting, go over your attendance list. Is there someone on staff or a volunteer who is connected with each young person? If some program participants have “slipped through the cracks,” decide who will make a special effort to get to know these young people.



One afterschool program utilized a computer application, HelloYello, that allows afterschool participants to check-in with a trusted adult staff on how their day is going^{vii}.

Get to Know Young People as Individuals

Try to give young people opportunities to interact with adults on a one-on-one basis. Find out what they like to do, who the important people in their lives are, and what they dream for the future. Allow some unstructured time for social interaction. One program decided to pay an adult staff member an additional 15 minutes after the program ended to “hang out” on the school steps to have informal conversations with the afterschool participants.



Institute a Check-In Circle

A check-in circle doesn't need to take very long and can greatly benefit both young people and program staff. In small groups (20 or fewer), begin the day by sitting quietly in a circle and letting each person speak briefly. Sometimes it helps to have a special item to pass around the



group like a talking stick that identifies the one who has the “rapt attention” of the group. When you first start instituting the check-in circle, it helps to plan a safe and interesting check-in question, such as, “What is your favorite thing to do at recess?” or “If you could go anywhere in the world for one day, where would you go?”

Be Genuine

Young people respond positively to honesty and sincerity. Young people want to get to know you, and love hearing about your childhood experiences (once in a while). Let them know a little bit about your likes and dislikes, funny habits, and/or hopes for the future. Allow time for real relationships to develop—don't try for instant connections.

Offer Praise

Everyone appreciates praise. Don't just save your praise for big accomplishments, but notice all the steps along the way. When you praise, make sure your words are true, and you are praising a real accomplishment (although it may be a small one). For young children, praise is also an alternative way to refocus negative behavior without scolding and singling out individuals: instead of “Sit down Robert!” try “Almost everyone is sitting quietly in the circle. Soon we can begin.”



Know Your Limits

Set appropriate boundaries with young people to let them know what you can and can't do as a staff member of your school or agency. Staff members need to be prepared with a list of resources so they will know what to do when a young person is facing a crisis.

ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

Although relationship building is best addressed by afterschool staff with direct connections with young people, the staff is supported by the larger provider organizations (school district or non-profit). Below are organizational practices that support relationship building in afterschool programs.

Ensure Low Youth to Staff/Volunteer Ratio

It is crucial to have enough adults in the room to encourage relationship building. How many is enough depends on your young people and your program, but there is a limit to how many relationships one staff member can sustain while facilitating program activities. Plan ahead for situations where a young person needs immediate one-on-one attention.

Ensure Safe, Reliable, and Accessible Activities and Spaces

Opportunities for relationship building can be greatly affected by the nature of a program's physical space. What is the nature of your space? Is it dependable and reliable each day? Try to offer young people a consistent and safe space that fosters relationship building.

Ensure Continuity and Consistency of Care

Young people, especially adolescents, need to trust that staff members will be there for them before a relationship develops. On a day-to-day basis, it is important to have a backup plan and sufficient staff to keep the program open in case of illness or other staff absence. The turnover among adult staff can be deeply felt by young people who invest themselves in relationships with adult program leaders. Organizational leaders should consider how to implement practices and policies that support the recruitment and retention of qualified staff and volunteers.

Hold High, Clear, and Fair Standards

When adults hold high expectations regarding young people's behavior and abilities, the young people feel respected and valued. Standards for young people's behavior should be clearly and regularly communicated along with clear, consistent consequences for violations. Standards are more likely to be perceived as fair if young people have input in creating them, if they are evenly applied to all young people and staff, and if there are grievance procedures for young people who feel unfairly treated.

Institute Ongoing, Results-based Staff and Organizational Improvement Process

Relationship building requires detailed attention to individual and interpersonal dynamics. Staff members need to have time to communicate with each other and with supervisors about what is going on with various young people. Staff members also need training in a range of skills to effectively build relationships. These skills include communication, positive discipline, facilitation, conflict resolution, and active listening. It is important to have a process for organizational improvement that takes young people's input into account.



RESOURCES

Below are a few resources that practitioners may find valuable.

- **Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive**
This report looks at the importance of building strong relationships to create a thriving student-centered culture. It includes an overview of the [Search Institute's](https://www.searchinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-Relationships-First-final.pdf) Developmental Relationships Framework. <https://www.searchinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017-Relationships-First-final.pdf>
- **The Best Resources On The importance Building Positive Relationships With Students**
<http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2011/03/08/the-best-resources-on-the-importance-of-building-positive-relationships-with-students/>
- **Youth Development Guide 2.0**
https://el360-365.weebly.com/uploads/1/1/0/6/110631901/reduced_-_yd_guide_2.0_final.pdf

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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About Temescal Associates

Temescal Associates is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who are serious about improving the lives of young people. Our clients include leaders of youth serving institutions and organizations, school and youth program practitioners, public and private funders, intermediary organizations, and policy makers.

About the Expanded Learning 360°/365 Project

Expanded learning: 360°/365 is a collaborative project dedicated to promoting the development of critical skills beyond academics that research has identified as essential to young people's success in school, work, and life.

END NOTES

ⁱ Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman, Editors; Community Programs to Promote Youth Development; <https://www.nap.edu/read/10022/chapter/1>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/itf09socemodev.asp>

ⁱⁱⁱ Michelle Alberti Gambone, Ph.D., Adena M. Klem, Ph.D., and James P. Connell, Ph.D.; *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*; <http://www.temescalassoc.com/db/lia/2015/05/18/finding-out-what-matters-for-youth-testing-key-links-in-a-community-action-framework-for-youth-development/>

^{iv} Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Link: <https://www.nap.edu/read/10022/chapter/2>

^v <http://www.nmbreakthroughs.org/wellness/5-benefits-of-healthy-relationships>

^{vi} California Core Competencies for Before and/or After School Professionals. Link: <http://www.asapconnect.org/tape/CoreCompetencies/CACoreComp.html>

^{vii} Temescal Associates; Promoting SEL and Character Skills in Expanded Learning Programs, Page 17; https://el360-365.weebly.com/uploads/1/1/0/6/110631901/promoting_sel_and_character_skills_in_expanded_learning_programs_-_reduced.pdf

^{viii} https://el360-365.weebly.com/uploads/1/1/0/6/110631901/reduced_yd_guide_-_final.pdf