

Foster Supportive Relationships

Introduction

One's relationships with others are a key driver of mental health and well-being. In schools, developmentally supportive relationships with both adults and with peers buffer against stress, help young people explore their identities, and support the development of important skills and mindsets. Building strong relationships involves making staffing and scheduling decisions that enable individuals in the school community to connect with one another, designing experiences that help deepen individuals' understanding of one another, and ensuring both adults and young people have the skills to build relationships.

Guidance to Get You Started

- **Create structured opportunities for relationship-building** to ensure that community members are deeply understood by one another. This includes opportunities to build secure attachments through trust, attunement, cognitive stimulation, and sensitivity. Structured opportunities for relationship-building could include routines like breakfast in homerooms each morning, community circles, or assemblies as well as practices like peer-to-peer mentoring programs, school leadership roles, and collaborative learning structures in classrooms.
- **Ensure time and space for unstructured socializing** through routines like recess, short breaks during the day, or social events outside of school. Ensure your school culture sets clear expectations for these experiences and then scaffold the experiences so students gradually receive more agency and choice about when, where, and with whom they socialize.
- **Explicitly build relationship skills** through social and emotional programming that emphasizes perspective-taking, empathy, communication, collaboration, and other interpersonal skills. This can improve the quality of relationships and therefore mental health outcomes. Schools can also help young people learn how to use technology and social media in ways that support connection and belonging.
- **Ensure each student is deeply known** by at least one adult in the learning environment. These relationships ensure students have someone to reach out to when in need and can help adults stay attuned to students' well-being so they can better determine if students need a higher tier of support. Small group advisories and 1:1 mentoring are two structures that can help. However, fostering adult mindsets and skills that support relationship-building may be even more important than developing these structures. Additionally, consider creating opportunities for students to work in partnership

A Look at Some Benefits

Environment Within and Beyond School

Provide young people with a support system as they navigate the world around them and experience new challenges and opportunities.

Individual Factors

Provide young people with positive modeling and support, which helps them develop individual factors that support mental health such as self-awareness and responsible decision-making.

Relationships with Others

Directly ensure students have the types of relationships with others that buffer against stress and trauma, help young people explore their identities, and support the development of important skills and mindsets.

Research suggests that developmentally supportive relationships between adults and peers may promote:

- Positive development and learning (e.g., Jones & Bouffard, 2012)
- Positive classroom behavior and climates (Osher et al., 2017)
- Social competence (Osher et al., 2017)
- Emotional recognition and regulation (Osher et al., 2017)
- Healthy executive function development (Blair & Raver, 2014)
- Interpersonal and communication (Osher et al., 2017)
- Academic perseverance (Osher et al., 2017)
- School satisfaction and engagement (Adams, Santo, & Bukowski, 2011; McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, & Hilt, 2009)

with adults in helping or leadership roles, such as student-led conferences or internships.

- **Build adults' understanding** of developmentally supportive relationships and how they are developed. Adults—including teachers, school leaders, and families—should learn the importance of expressing care for students, challenging them to grow, providing support, sharing power, and expanding the possibilities for them see for themselves. Adults should also have an opportunity to develop strategies for cultivating relationships with their students or children.

Additional Resources to Explore

Developing Positive Teacher-Student Relations

This chapter from the book *Educator's Guide to Preventing and Solving Discipline Problems* provides research and practical tips on why educators should develop positive relationships with their students and how they can accomplish it.

The Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework

A one-page overview of The Search Institute's definition of developmental relationships.

Relationships First: Creating Connections That Help Young People Thrive

A comprehensive paper from The Search Institute that goes into what developmental relationships are, how students experience such relationships, different types, how they can be developed, and more.

The DR Download

Three practical tools from The Search Institute that can help adults who work with youth understand and build developmental relationships. The DR In Your Development Tool asks adults to reflect on the relationships in their own lives. The Developmental Relationships Framework identifies twenty relational actions that contribute to positive youth development. Finally, the Intentionality Tool asks adults to self-assess the degree to which they currently work to start and strengthen relationships with young people.