

Enhancing Parent-Youth Relationships

A Gateway to Family Engagement

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Abstract

Building partnerships with families is a vexing challenge for schools and other organizations. The challenge is particularly evident as students shift to middle and high school. Prototype testing of an interactive, two-generation family engagement resource, *Keep Connected*, suggests that strengthening parent-youth relationships has potential for engaging diverse families as they transition into middle school and adolescence.

The Context

Many factors contribute to the gaps in the ways schools and organizations engage families. Beyond the logistical issues, personal and interpersonal factors impede engagement: perceived stigma, embarrassment, or fear of being judged, blamed, or labeled as inadequate parents, a loss of privacy, or resistance to outside interference. *Keep Connected* focuses on strengths and relationships in diverse families to build trust.

Methods

Five organizations serving mostly low-income populations and communities of color were recruited to co-develop and test strategies through a prototyping process. The sites included two school-based programs (North Carolina and Minnesota), an affordable housing nonprofit (District of Columbia), and two community-based programs (Pennsylvania and Texas).

Prototype testing occurred between February and June 2016. In each 90-minute workshop, youth and parents participate in separate activities for half of each session, then come together for shared

activities that include reflecting on relationships, practicing relational skills, and developing a family “pledge” to sustain relational practices.

The research team observed facilitated sessions; collected written and verbal feedback; and conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with facilitators, youth, and parents.

Selected Insights

1. Many families are initially resistant to participation, based on past experience of family programs being tied to problems.
2. The approach resonates with families. Most expressed the desire to continue meeting.
3. Fully engaging younger youth is more challenging.
4. The Developmental Relationships Framework offers families a chance to talk about dynamics that otherwise might stay under the surface as they enter adolescence.
5. The element that generates the most discussion is “share power.”

Next Steps

A new phase of formal pilot testing is occurring in the 2016-17 school year in five partner organizations. Presuming the model continues to demonstrate value to partner organizations, Search Institute will make it available for broader use beginning in Fall 2017. In addition, we will continue build evidence of its impact through ongoing piloting, evaluation, and a quasi-experimental study (tentatively starting in 2018).

Search Institute's 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. They involve a dynamic mix of five elements, which are expressed through 20 actions.*

Elements	Actions	Definitions
 <p>1. Express Care Show me that I matter to you.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be dependable..... Be someone I can trust. • Listen..... Really pay attention when we are together. • Believe in me Make me feel known and valued. • Be warm..... Show me you enjoy being with me. • Encourage Praise me for my efforts and achievements. 	
 <p>2. Challenge Growth Push me to keep getting better.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expect my best..... Expect me to live up to my potential. • Stretch..... Push me to go further. • Hold me accountable..... Insist I take responsibility for my actions. • Reflect on failures..... Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks. 	
 <p>3. Provide Support Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigate..... Guide me through hard situations and systems. • Empower..... Build my confidence to take charge of my life. • Advocate..... Defend me when I need it. • Set boundaries..... Put in place limits that keep me on track. 	
 <p>4. Share Power Treat me with respect and give me a say.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect me Take me seriously and treat me fairly. • Include me Involve me in decisions that affect me. • Collaborate Work with me to solve problems and reach goals. • Let me lead Create opportunities for me to take action and lead. 	
 <p>5. Expand Possibilities Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspire Inspire me to see possibilities for my future. • Broaden horizons..... Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places. • Connect..... Introduce me to people to help me grow. 	

* Because relationships are, by definition, bidirectional, each person in a strong relationship engages in and experiences each of these actions. However, for the purpose of clarity, the framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person.