

How Positive Adult Relationships Impact Youth Social Emotional Growth and Development

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Adolescence at a Glance

Adolescence, the time of life one might miss... then you remember the zits and the heartbreaks and you're happy to be cozy in your King size bed with your full-time (exhausting) job. Being a youth comes with a roller coaster of hormones, big decisions, and a whole lot of development. Adolescence kickstarts emotion fueled choices related to relationships - both intimate and platonic. Dopamine levels increase inside of the brain during this stage, causing the potential for higher risk taking and reward-seeking behaviors in all areas of the youth's life (Santrock, 2023). Feeling the overwhelming pressure of "social rankings" in their school, youth begin to form close-knit circles of friends they trust and start to find their way. As they continue on, drama and dating becomes a large part of their world, and youth tend to pull away from family and relationships at home (Santrock, 2023). Youth may seek out their peers for co-regulation and problem solving help, their friends serving as their new safe space to vent (Silvers, 2022). Though life is moving so quickly around them, individual growth and questioning occurs for most youth, discovering what makes them special, their passions and interests, and begin gaining a sense of identity. The brain is developing with immense action, the executive functioning skills are increasing in addition to their logical thinking and critical analysis; brain regions connect and grow, improving planning and problem solving skills (Santrock, 2026). So much is happening at once, and with the present levels of technology this world is facing, it's no shock that our youth are overwhelmed in 2026! Although youth are shifting their time (and let's face it - energy) away from home during this time, there are plenty of other positive adult relationships in the world of an

adolescent to help guide them through uncertainty and make an impact on their development.

Positive Adults

It takes a village - that's what they say! Well, this saying rings true in a different yet clear way in the present. With youth overcommitted to different sports and groups, sometimes it feels like Coach Jim is getting more face-time with your kiddo than you do on a week to week basis. From a study in China, children who were co-parented by their grandparent during the time their mother was at work, and had both adults engaging in a consistently positive relationship, had greater social-emotional outcomes in life. On the flip side, when one of the two adults was a negative figure to the child, the positive parent could not make up for this negative relationship (Xing et. al, 2016). A village must work in harmony, similar to the way each adult touches specific parts of a youth's life and guides them as they grow into their unique selves. There are different mechanisms to adult-youth relationships which may impact the positive effects on the youth's development. Cultivating trust can be the first and foremost important step for adult-youth relationships. Trustworthy adults typically have qualities of character which enhance their relational skills with youth, including but not limited to helpfulness, reliability, consistency and unconditional kindness (Champagne, 2025). Once trust is established, it can magnify the participation and experience which a youth is receiving from a program (Griffith & Johnson, 2019). Practicing effective communication and modeling effective communication as an adult, engaging in back-and-forth conversations with adolescents encourages more open sharing and connection. Allowing room for open and accepting communication helps adults to consider specific

and unique needs of each youth they are working with (Ramey et. al, 2017). Paired with this effective communication comes youth empowerment; not only is the adult sharing the metaphorical talking stick, they are supporting youth agency and accountability. When youth have ownership over their choices and actions, they have more motivation to participate, which leads to greater success (Krauss et. al, 2014). Adolescents are bursting with energy, ready to take on responsibilities that are of interest to them, and treating them as partners may inspire a greater drive towards their accomplishments. Last but certainly not least, showing care and compassion for youth as they navigate the treacherous waters of adolescence can guide them through their emotions, passions and social relationships. Showing consistent, calm kindness to youth experiencing large feelings can foster an empathetic and understanding baseline relationship which allows students to feel safer seeking out assistance when they need it (Williford et. al, 2023). This compassionate attitude is a foundational layer of other key mechanisms mentioned before, such as trust and effective communication. Ultimately, when these various elements align, the "village" becomes a powerful engine for growth, ensuring that every adult-youth interaction serves as a building block for a resilient and thriving future.

Impacts on Youth

Adults who lead, coach, teach, guide, and shape are significant in the social-emotional development of adolescents. Youth who are equipped with a team of well-balanced adults who have the best interest of kids at heart are more emotionally mature, manage their stress, and participate in empathetic conflict resolution while obtaining healthy boundaries. Emotional dysregulation and mental health issues are prevalent in youth

across America. Children who have strong communication with parents and teachers as well as community adults outside of their homes are linked to less depression and suicide attempts (Pisani et. al 2013). Adults model self-worth, self-awareness, and trust in one's chosen actions and behaviors, which in turn, translates to youth who are uncertain of their self-image and managing big emotions. Adult-youth relationships are a resource for well-being, and when the quality of their engagement increases, so does the resiliency and success of a child (Ungar, 2013). Our abilities to participate in self-controlled conflict resolution is impacted by our emotions (Halperin 2014), therefore with more quality social emotional growth and resiliency, youth can utilize their executive functioning skills when approaching a conflict that needs to be solved. When children have their safety and emotional brain states met, they have greater access to their executive skills which aid in conflict resolution, emotional regulation, healthy communication, empathy and boundary setting (Becky Bailey 2011). By intentionally nurturing these secure connections, we move beyond mere supervision to provide a vital safety net that empowers youth to navigate life's challenges with clarity, composure, and confidence.

From Theory to Practice

Translating relational mechanisms into real-world action is pivotal for both field professionals and families. This section outlines how we move from understanding these dynamics to implementing them effectively across our communities. Mutual partnerships can happen more seamlessly between home, school, and community creating a stronger implication for predictive success of a child. Long-term effects of

positive influence on academic performance have been linked to parent-school relationships and school provided family competency training (Spath et. al, 2008). Empowering adults who are participating in adult-youth relationships with research-based tools and strategies allows them their own agency and can stimulate advocacy for individualized needs within their own communities. For anyone in the field, this information provides a roadmap for accountability and service improvement; moving to evidence-based practice ensures that mentorship and teaching is intentional and effective. Education brought to professionals in these areas working with youth should be up to date and chosen specifically to align with their demographic and community needs. Additionally, for school-home-community partnerships to thrive and adults in adult-youth relationships to flourish with empowerment, schools and other community organizations need to agree to proper funding and support. To sustain these efforts, policy and funding must be redirected toward programs that prioritize relational health as a measurable outcome, rather than just academic test scores. The learning a youth encounters is tightly linked to the relational experience (Wortham & Jackson, 2011), so equipping leaders with every tool possible can make a difference. Bridging the gap between theory and practice ensures that every adult has the skills and support needed to foster a thriving future for all youth.

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