



HELPING KIDS THRIVE AT HOME

How Itasca area youth experience strength and resilience in their relationships with parents and grandparents



The SPARK Youth Voices Survey is a partnership between Itasca area schools, SPARK: Stronger Futures for All, and Search Institute, with support from the Blandin Foundation.

The survey is designed to:

- Amplify youth voice by telling the story of youth in the Itasca area aligned with the themes in SPARK’s Pathway for Student Success.
- Identify opportunities for enhancing student success by strengthening relationships and opportunities for young people in their schools and communities.
- Focus attention on a shared commitment to young people’s growth and thriving across the Itasca area.
- Motivate individual and collective actions among youth and adults to create stronger schools and communities where all young people learn and thrive.

SPARK: Stronger Futures for All (www.sparkfutures.org) drives community engagement to ensure success for all Itasca Area youth.

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About This Report

This report was prepared for SPARK by **Search Institute** (www.searchinstitute.org), a non-profit organization that bridges research and practice to help young people be and become their best selves. Our current work seeks to surround young people—particularly those from marginalized communities—with developmental relationships that put them on the path to become thriving and contributing adults.

Special thanks to the students, administrators, staff, and families in the schools that participated in the survey. Thanks to the students, school leaders, and community leaders who guided the design of the study.

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THE POWER OF PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS

Parenting adults* and grandparents play vital roles in the lives of youth in the Itasca area. And even when their relationships include challenges, those relationships are influential and important throughout their teen years and beyond.

The challenge is that these relationships dramatically change as kids grow up. The opportunity lies in adjusting these relationships to guide young people as they grow up to become responsible young adults ready to be part of the broader community and world.

Highlights from this report

In fall 2018, more than 3,000 6th- to 12th-grade young people from 11 Itasca-area public schools completed the SPARK Youth Voice Survey.** It gives new insights into young peoples' experiences in many areas of their lives. This report focuses on relationships in their families, particularly with parenting adults and grandparents. Among the key findings:

- Most Itasca youth experience strong “developmental relationships” with their parenting adults. These relationships include five key elements* that help young people be and become their best selves.
- When young people experience stronger relationships with parenting adults and grandparents, they are more likely to feel like they belong in their community, and have a positive view of themselves and their own future.
- About one-third of youth (30%) identified grandparents as playing one of the biggest roles in their lives (in addition to parents, teachers, and friends). These young people experience many strengths in their relationships with their grandparents, including a particularly high number who say grandparents share power with them.
- Young people are stronger and more resilient when they experience strong relationships with parents and grandparents. Many Itasca area youth remind us that they experience tremendous strength in their families. That strength is central to the strengths of our young people and our communities.

* The term “parenting adult” (and sometimes “parent,” for brevity) is used to refer to an adult who, regardless of their biological relationship, assumes legal responsibility for a child. This may include biological, adoptive, step, and foster mothers and/or fathers, grandparents, other family members, or others in the community in custodial roles.

** For more background on the survey, see page 14.

*See the framework of developmental relationships on the back of this booklet.

THE POWER OF POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTING ADULTS

When Itasca area youth experience strong relationships with their parenting adults, they are more likely to do well in many areas of life.

Compared to youth who don't experience strengths in their relationships* with their parenting adult, those who do experience strong relationships are ...

- ✓ **3.7 times more likely to have a positive view of themselves.**
- ✓ **3.2 times more likely to feel like they belong in their community.**
- ✓ **2.3 times more likely to set and work toward achievable goals.**
- ✓ **2.0 times more likely to be committed to and enjoy learning.**
- ✓ **1.9 times more likely to see a future for themselves in their community.**
- ✓ **1.5 times more likely to aspire to continue their education beyond high school.**

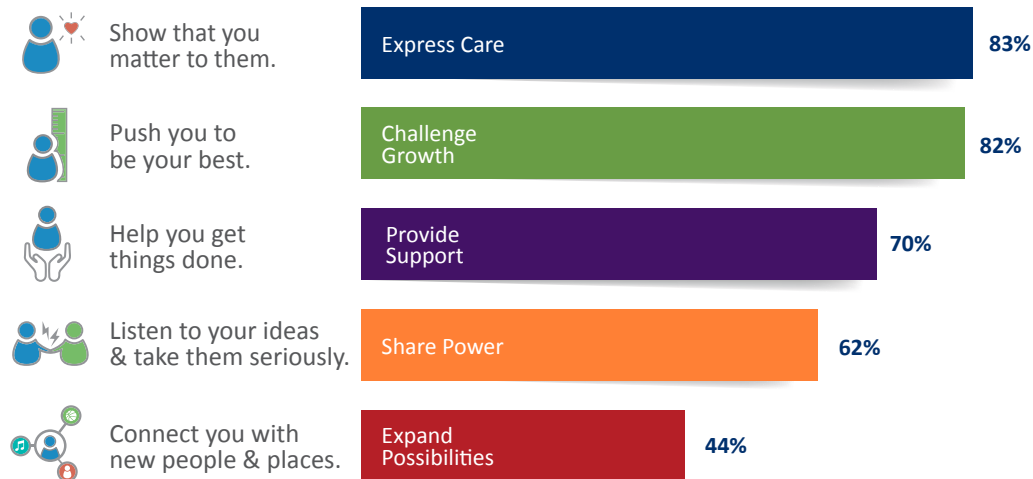
PARENT-YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

What makes relationships with parenting adults powerful and positive in young people’s lives? Search Institute national research¹ has shown that young people benefit from relationships that feature five key elements and 20 actions of a developmental relationship.*

The SPARK Youth Voice Survey asked Itasca area youth about their relationships with their parenting adults. Most young people see a lot of strength in their relationships with their parent.

Young people are most likely to experience “express care” and “challenge growth.” They are least likely to experience “expand possibilities.”

Percentages of Itasca area youth who said their parenting adults did each action* often or very often.








*Each action represents one element of a “developmental relationship” in Search Institute’s research-based framework, which is shown on the back cover of this booklet.

¹For more on this research, visit: www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/

DIFFERENCES IN EXPERIENCES

YOUTH FROM MANY BACKGROUNDS EXPERIENCE SIMILAR OVERALL PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTING ADULTS

However, two subgroup differences stand out: financial strain and grade level.

Percent of youth who say their parenting adults do each action often or very often	FINANCIAL STRAIN		GRADE LEVEL	
	Not Financially Strained	Financially Strained*	Middle School	High School
 Express Care	88%	74%	86%	81%
 Challenge Growth	88%	73%	83%	82%
 Provide Support	77%	59%	76%	66%
 Share Power	68%	51%	64%	60%
 Expand Possibilities	50%	34%	49%	41%

Shading indicates greatest difference.

* A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

RELATIONSHIP GAPS IN FAMILIES FACING FINANCIAL STRAINS

Youth whose families have trouble buying what they need are less likely to say that their parenting adults consistently do each of the actions. It's likely that financial strain in families makes it harder to focus on maintaining relationships amid the stresses of everyday life.

GAPS FOR OLDER YOUTH IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTING ADULTS

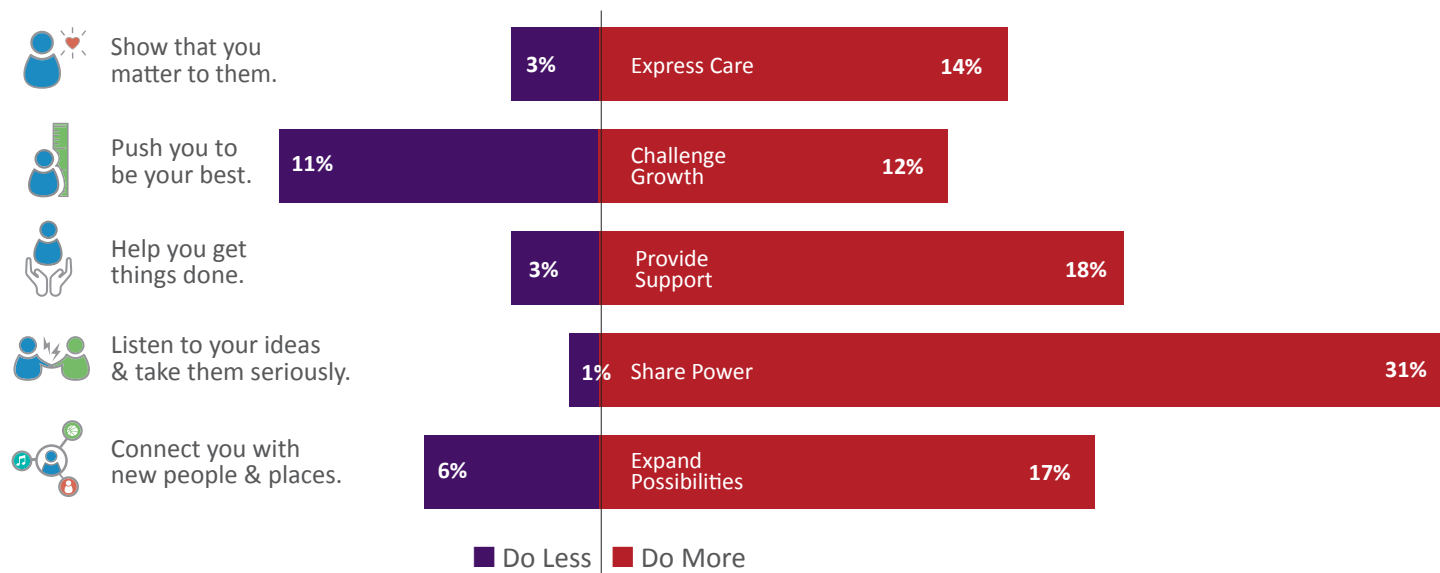
There are also differences in some elements of relationships between middle schoolers and high schoolers. Some of these changes may simply reflect that other people are playing more of these roles in young people's lives.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTING ADULTS

Just because a parent doesn't do a particular action "often" or "very often" doesn't mean a teenager wants the parent to do it more. And just because they do it a lot doesn't mean teenagers want them to keep doing it (even if it might be helpful for their development).

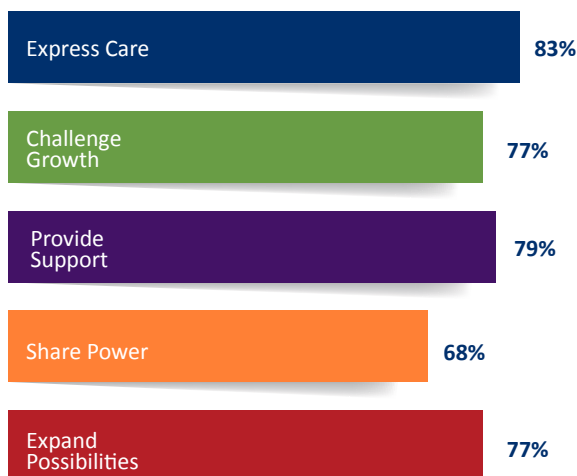
So the survey asked Itasca area youth whether they wanted parenting adults to do each of the five relational actions more, less, or keep it the same.

- Seven out of 10 or more youth are satisfied with the different ways their parenting adults interact with them (see Just Right! below).
- They are most likely to want their parents to do more to share power.
- They are most likely to want their parent to do less to push them to challenge growth.



JUST RIGHT!

The figure above shows that some Itasca youth want more or less of each action in a developmental relationship with their parenting adults. It's important to remember, though, that most youth are satisfied already. Here are the percentage of Itasca youth who said their relationship with their parenting adult has **just the right amount of each action**:








YOUTH PRIORITIES: WHAT THEY WANT MORE VARIES

Itasca area youth have somewhat different priorities of what they wish their parenting adults would do more, based on their gender, grade level, and level of financial strain in their family. There were no other meaningful differences in other subgroups of youth.

Here are the biggest differences:

- **Grade Level**—High school youth are particularly likely to want their parents to express care more, compared to middle school youth.
- **Gender**—Compared to males, females particularly want their parents to do more to share power, express care, and expand possibilities.
- **Financial Strain**—Young people whose families experience financial strain wish their parents would do more of each action, compared to youth whose families do not experience financial strain.

Percent of youth who wish their parenting adults would do more of each action	GRADE LEVEL		GENDER		FINANCIAL STRAIN*	
	Middle School	High School	Female	Male	Not Strained	Strained*
 Express Care	10%	17%	18%	9%	10%	20%
 Challenge Growth	10%	14%	12%	12%	9%	18%
 Provide Support	15%	19%	20%	14%	12%	26%
 Share Power	27%	33%	37%	23%	27%	39%
 Expand Possibilities	14%	18%	21%	12%	13%	23%

Shading indicates areas of greatest difference.

* A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH GRANDPARENTS

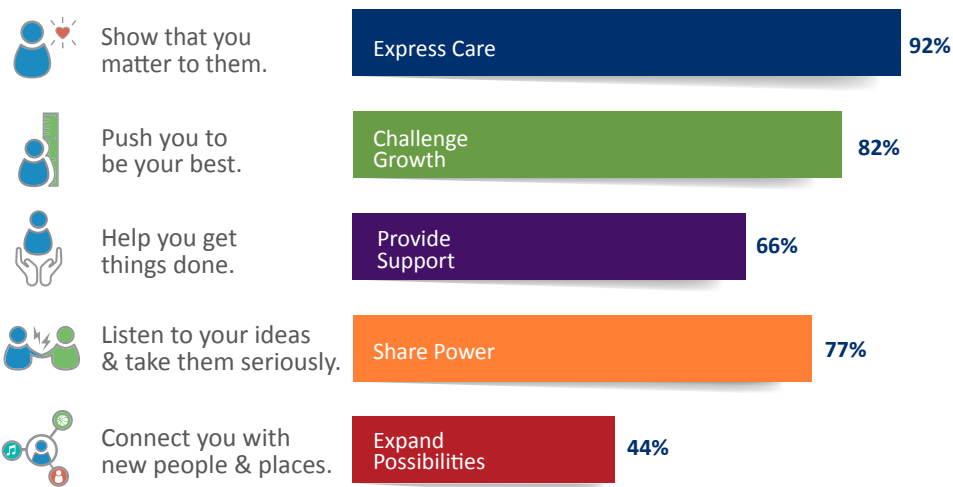
It's no secret that grandparents can have a unique and special relationship with their grandchildren. While that relationship is often sentimentalized, for many youth it is an important, life-shaping relationship.

That seems to be the case for many Itasca area youth. When asked in the survey to select someone in addition to parents, friends, and teachers who plays a big role in their lives, one out of three (30%) youth selected grandparents—far more than any other group of people. Youth who picked grandparents see these relationships as particularly well-rounded.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH GRANDPARENTS ARE WELL-ROUNDED FOR THESE YOUTH

Three out of four say their grandparents share power with them often or very often—which is more common than in many other relationships (based on this survey as well as surveys in other communities).

Itasca area youth who said their grandparents do each relational action* often or very often (based on those who identified grandparents as playing a big role in their life in addition to parents, teachers, and friends).



*Each action represents one element of a “developmental relationship” in Search Institute’s research-based framework, which is shown on the back of this booklet.

KEEP IN MIND WHO FOCUSED ON GRANDPARENTS

These findings on grandparents focus on the subset of young people who selected grandparents as a key relationship. Because they indicated that this is an important relationship, we should not be surprised that they also see a lot of strength in the relationship. That’s worth celebrating!

That said, we should not assume that these responses represent all young people’s experiences of relationships with their grandparents. Youth who do not have meaningful relationships with grandparents did not complete survey items about their relationship with their grandparent(s).

AMONG YOUTH WHO SEE GRANDPARENTS AS PLAYING A KEY ROLE IN THEIR LIVES, MOST FEEL SATISFIED WITH THEIR RELATIONSHIP.

Percentages of Itasca area youth who say the level of each action is “just right” in their relationship with their grandparent, based on those youth who selected grandparents as playing a big role in their life in addition to parents, teachers, and friends.



BROADENING AND RECOGNIZING GRANDPARENTS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Sometimes when we think of “family” we think only of “parents” or those in parenting roles. Certainly parenting adults are primary resources in young people’s lives. In addition, many young people value their extended family and the unique relationships they form with grandparents.

These survey findings suggest that relationships with grandparents are not just fun and enjoyable, but also play important roles in young people’s growth and development—at least for those who have the benefit of these strong relationships.

How might more strong relationships between young people and grandparents be encouraged in families and communities?

And for those who do have strong relationships, how might they not only be recognized and celebrated, but also encouraged and supported as an important part of the web of relationships young people want and need to thrive in their families and communities?

GRANDFAMILIES AND OTHER MULTI-GENERATION HOUSEHOLDS

Itasca area youth highlighted the power of their relationships with their grandparents. For some young people, those grandparents may be part of their households, including being their primary caregivers.

The Minnesota Board on Aging estimates that 68,000 children in Minnesota live in the primary care of a grandparent or other older relative. That represents an increase of 40% since 2000. Even more are in multi-generational households with grandparents, parents, and children sharing responsibilities.

The SPARK Youth Voices Survey didn’t focus on the structure of families, but on the quality of relationships within families. Whether young people live with grandparents all the time or just see them occasionally, these multi-generational relationships have potential to have a lasting, positive influence on young people’s growth and thriving.

For more for more information on grandfamilies and other multi-generation households, visit Generations United (www.gu.org).





ACTION IDEAS

SLOWING DOWN FOR RELATIONSHIPS

This study is a reminder to slow down and reflect on our relationships with, within, and among families. Page 11 offers a tool for you to reflect on your own family relationships. It's through those relationships that we first build the connections and trust we need to work together and find the creative solutions to the challenges. Perhaps more importantly, it is through relationships that we find the courage and strength to face and persevere through the challenges and struggles. For many people, that's why families are so important—even when they aren't perfect.

On page 12 and 13 are ideas for being more intentional about relationships, organized around the five elements of developmental relationships that were the focus of this study. You'll find ideas for parenting adults, youth, grandparents, and people who work with families.

But don't stop with our ideas. Come up with your own. And don't let trying new ideas become another task list that gets in the way of building your relationships!

STRONG FAMILIES, STRONG COMMUNITIES

Relationships with parenting adults and grandparents are vital to young people's growth and development. At the same time, it's important not to stop there. Other family members also matter, including siblings and extended family members.

Beyond their families, young people also need strong relationships across all areas of their lives—in schools, in programs they are part of, in faith communities, in places they work, and in other places they spend time. They need strong relationships with adults and with friends.

That's why many leaders in the Itasca area are working together to encourage and support people, schools, and organizations across the area to be intentional in ensuring that each and every young person in the Itasca area has the kinds of relationships they need in their lives to thrive. Other relationships in the school and community are most powerful when they are also connected to and working as a team with the families.

Each relationship—within families and beyond—has power and potential to help young people learn, grow, and thrive. When those relationships are all on the same team working together, their potential and impact is transformational!



Another tool for deepening family relationships:

www.KeepConnected.info

A Search Institute resource.

REFLECTING ON AN IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIP IN YOUR FAMILY

Think about people in your family, including those in your extended family. Who are some of the people with whom you have strong relationships?

What are some ways *you have experienced* one or more of these elements of a developmental relationship in your relationship with this person?



Express Care



Challenge Growth



Provide Support



Share Power



Expand Possibilities

What are some ways *you have shown* one or more of elements of a developmental relationship in your relationship with this person?

How can you thank them for helping you grown?

What could you do next to deepen your relationship?

YOUTH

PARENTING ADULTS

Express Care



- Let your parent(s) know when you appreciate something they've done, even if it's a little thing. A spontaneous thank you or a hug can mean a whole lot to them.
- Follow through when your parent(s) ask you to do something. It will build their confidence and trust that they can count on you.

- Pay attention. Focus on each other when someone is talking about things that matter to them. Put away your cell phones to give each other your full attention.
- Make time for lightness. Share in some humor, fun, and laughter amid the practical tasks that you do together.

Challenge Growth



- When you set a personal goal for yourself, tell your parent(s) about it. Ask them to check on you and hold you accountable.
- When you or another family member has a setback or makes a big mistake, wait a bit, and then, talk together about of what you might learn from the experience.

- Expect kids to do their best, even when doing something they don't really like.
- Remind kids that making mistakes is a part of learning. Praise them for hard work, whether those efforts succeed or fail.

Provide Support



- Don't wait until the last minute if you need help figuring out a challenging problem or situation. Talk with a parent early when there may be more options and solutions.
- If you want to solve something by yourself, but you need to think out loud about it with someone, come up with your own words to say: "I don't want you to tell me what to do, I just need you to let me think out loud."

- When your kids aren't getting the help they need, find people who can address the issue.
- Give kids more support when they are struggling, and less when they are making progress. Step back as their skills and confidence build.

Share Power



- Offer to take on a new family responsibility that gives you a chance to show new skills and abilities while also benefiting others.
- If you're not happy with the way something is working in your family, ask for a time to talk about how you might try a different approach. Bring some suggestions or ideas to try instead.

- Include kids in thinking about decisions that affect them, even when you have to make the final call.
- Let kids make decisions about activities you do together and what you talk about. Don't jump in too fast when they don't make quick decisions or think of things to talk about.

Expand Possibilities



- When you learn something that your parent(s) don't know are interested in, ask them if they'd like you to show them how to do it.
- With your family, decide some area of life that you'd like to explore (such as nature, science, religion, fitness, food, music). Then come up with a plan for each family member to introduce others to one new thing in that area each week.

- Introduce kids to a wide range of people, places, ideas, cultures, and vocations. Start with ones they're curious about.
- Find ways for your children to spend time with people who are different from your family.

GRANDPARENTS*

PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH FAMILIES

Express Care



- Find ways to spend one-on-one time with each grandkid. Do something that they don't do as part of their usual routine.
- Even if you live far away from your grandkids, find ways to show them that you're thinking of them and they matter to you. Celebrate with them when good things happen, even if you can't be there.

- Whenever possible, start conversations by listening to families. Notice things that are going well and that are worth celebrating.
- Keep track of significant events in the lives of families you work with regularly. Follow up to see how they're doing after important events or milestones.

Challenge Growth



- Listen for your grandkids' own hopes and aspirations, and then follow up with them to see what concrete steps they're taking to work toward their personal goals.
- Avoid being the "indulgent" grandparent, leaving the "challenging" part to parents. Remember that kids will sometimes push hard for a grandparent when they may resist doing the same thing for a parent

- Ask families about their own goals or hopes, and then check up on them to see what kind of progress they're making. If they're not, encourage them to reset and to take a new next step toward their goal.
- When families have setbacks, reflect with them about what they can learn from what happened and how they can reset to move forward from where they are now.

Provide Support



- Work with your child's parent to ensure that you're both on the same page about where your grandchild needs support and where they need to be challenged.
- When your grandchild or your grandchild's parent(s) are experiencing a lot of stress or challenges, ask how you can be most helpful. (Don't assume.)

- Ask families about other formal and informal sources of support they have in their lives. How can those sources be tapped and strengthened, when needed?
- When identifying new supports or services families may need, introduce them to a specific person so they have a personal connection to the new resource.

Share Power



- Ask your grandkids what they'd like to do together (or give options). Sometimes their choices will surprise you.
- Find challenging projects or problems to figure out together. The opportunity to work through things with a grandparent can be empowering for young people.

- When possible, involve both youth and parents in discussions, planning, and training when decisions or learning could benefit everyone in the family.
- Identify parents who have strong gifts, and invite them to play leadership roles in your organization or community, potentially organizing and leading other families to give voice to family priorities and concerns.

Expand Possibilities



- Encourage your grandkids to introduce you to music, technology, sports, and other parts of their world that they are excited about. You may discover something new that you really enjoy too!
- As you learn about things that interest your grandkids, introduce them to people you know who work in or know about those areas. Or visit places of interest together

- Keep track of things families express interest in. Then when opportunities come up, send a quick text or note to highlight the opportunity. (It also lets them know you remember their interests.)
- Ask parenting adults about things they wish they could learn or do, then connect them with opportunities to learn those things in your community.

BACKGROUND

The SPARK Youth Voices Survey

Survey development: The survey used in 2018 was updated from a survey conducted in 2014 based on extensive input from students, teachers, and leaders in Itasca area schools and the SPARK Council to ensure that the findings are relevant and valuable.

Data collection: Between August 31 and October 15, 2018, a total of 3,253 Itasca area students were surveyed via computers or tablets during a class period. A total of 242 surveys were dropped from the sample during data cleaning (due to missing data or suspicious responses), resulting in a final sample of 3,011 students.

Sample Characteristics:

Participating Schools	Students in the final sample
Bigfork High School	114
Deer River High School	352
Floodwood School	98
Grand Rapids Area Learning Center	66
Grand Rapids High School	865
Greenway High School	480
Hill City School	133
Nashwauk-Keewatin High School	170
Northern Lights Community School	86
Northland High School	125
Robert J. Elkington Middle School	522
TOTAL	3,011

Grade Level

Middle school (Grades 7-8)* **42%**

High school (Grades 9-12) **59%**

*Includes 183 sixth graders in four schools: Deer River, Northern Lights, Hill City, and Greenway.

Gender

Female **47%**

Male **51%**

Other* **3%**

*The 'Other' category includes youth who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. This sample was too small to include in the broad gender analyses for this report, but will be used for focused analyses.

Race-Ethnicity (self-reported)

Native **5%**

White **66%**

Other* **6%**

Multi-racial **24%**

*Students who selected Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, or Other have been combined due to insufficient sample sizes.

Financial Strain (self-reported)

63% (n = 1,584)

Not financially strained—Family has little or no problems buying what they need or can buy special things if they want to.

37% (n = 928)

Financially strained—Family sometimes can't buy the things they need or has just enough money for the things they need.

NOTE: Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

Use this page to reflect on your own—or with others—about the findings in this summary report.

What?

What 2-3 things stood out for you the most as you read the findings?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Gut?

How did you react to the findings? Where you surprised? Upset? Pleased? Puzzled?

What do you think made you react the way you did? What experiences did it stir up for you?

So What?

What possibilities do you see that need to be considered? What actions need to be taken? What's most important to you?

How do you think young people might want others in the community to respond to these survey findings?

Now What?






What questions do you want to ask someone to help you understand the “why” behind the findings?

Who can you share the findings with who could really use them?

What's one thing you'll be willing to try to respond to the findings?

SEARCH INSTITUTE'S FRAMEWORK OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Young people are more likely to grow up successfully when they experience developmental relationships with important people in their lives. Search Institute has identified five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people’s lives.

ELEMENTS	ACTIONS	DEFINITIONS
 <p>Express Care</p> <p><i>Show me that I matter to you.</i></p>	<p>Be dependable.....</p> <p>Listen.....</p> <p>Believe in me.....</p> <p>Be warm.....</p> <p>Encourage.....</p>	<p>Be someone I can trust.</p> <p>Really pay attention when we are together.</p> <p>Make me feel known and valued.</p> <p>Show me you enjoy being with me.</p> <p>Praise me for my efforts and achievements.</p>
 <p>Challenge Growth</p> <p><i>Push me to keep getting better.</i></p>	<p>Expect my best.....</p> <p>Stretch.....</p> <p>Hold me accountable.....</p> <p>Reflect on failures.....</p>	<p>Expect me to live up to my potential.</p> <p>Push me to go further.</p> <p>Insist I take responsibility for my actions.</p> <p>Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.</p>
 <p>Provide Support</p> <p><i>Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.</i></p>	<p>Navigate.....</p> <p>Empower.....</p> <p>Advocate.....</p> <p>Set boundaries.....</p>	<p>Guide me through hard situations and systems.</p> <p>Build my confidence to take charge of my life.</p> <p>Stand up for me when I need it.</p> <p>Put in place limits that keep me on track.</p>
 <p>Share Power</p> <p><i>Treat me with respect and give me a say.</i></p>	<p>Respect me.....</p> <p>Include me.....</p> <p>Collaborate.....</p> <p>Let me lead.....</p>	<p>Take me seriously and treat me fairly.</p> <p>Involve me in decisions that affect me.</p> <p>Work with me to solve problems and reach goals.</p> <p>Create opportunities for me to take action and lead.</p>
 <p>Expand Possibilities</p> <p><i>Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.</i></p>	<p>Inspire.....</p> <p>Broaden horizons.....</p> <p>Connect.....</p>	<p>Inspire me to see possibilities for my future.</p> <p>Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.</p> <p>Introduce me to more people who can help me develop and thrive.</p>

NOTE: Relationships are, by definition, bidirectional, with each person giving and receiving. So each person in a strong relationship both engages in and experiences each of these actions. However, for the purpose of clarity, this framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person.

More information on developmental relationships: www.searchinstitute.org/developmental-relationships/