

## STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

# The Power of Peer Relationships

## *A Study of Peer Programs in the United States*

### Introduction

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Adolescence is a time of major growth and change in all areas of life. Young people explore a range of new settings, perspectives, and behaviors at a time when family influence shifts, and peer influences increase.

Too often, these peer influences are only viewed and studied from a negative perspective, focusing on influence toward risky behaviors. However, a broad array of developmental and behavioral research points unequivocally to peer relationships as critical resources in multiple areas of positive development.

Indeed, peer relationships are foundational for many aspects of development, including the formation of character strengths that protect youth in the face of diverse challenges, such as bullying and academic stress as well as more complex social dynamics, such as entrenched structural inequities.

Since the 1960s, programs in schools and other settings have tapped the power of peer influence and relationships to reduce specific behaviors of concern in adolescence, such as bullying, dropping out of school, suicide, substance abuse, and unsafe sexual practices. Building skills through interactive, experiential education methods, these programs help participants develop core elements of positive relationships, such as trust and mutual respect.

### Gaps in the Field

Although these elements are important, many other dimensions of peer relationships are rarely examined rigorously in research on peer programs. At least

three important gaps remain that, if answered, would significantly advance the field:

1. Research on peer programs disproportionately emphasizes documenting long-term outcomes, rather than also examining mechanisms, including more proximal outcomes, such as character strengths. Understanding these more proximal outcomes, and structural features that produce them, is critical for understanding and enhancing program impact.
2. Studies rarely unpack the role of peer relationships within these programs, even though these relationships are clearly core features of programs. Making these dynamics explicit has potential for improving program quality and increasing impact. Furthermore, in some peer programs, youth build relationships that empower them to tackle structural inequities that are barriers to positive outcomes for some.
3. Much of the published research involves individual cases or single models of peer programs. Though these cases are promising, the general lack of experimental studies across multiple models limits the power of current findings for improving practice or demonstrating impact more broadly.

### A Critical Research Agenda

Addressing these gaps requires a sustained, systematic research and development agenda that builds from exploratory and observational studies toward experimental studies that examine the dynamics of peer relationships, the effectiveness of specific interventions to improve dynamics, and the

proximal and long-term outcomes of these efforts. This research agenda must:

1. Identify elements of peer programs that are essential to program effectiveness across different models and populations. This begins with careful observation and systematic analyses of successful peer programs.
2. Define specific, proximal outcomes of peer programs that impact a range of distal outcomes and are relevant across diverse program models and populations. This articulation will allow for measuring the impact of program principles and practices that transcend particular curricula or program models.

### **The Current Study**

This study is the first of a multi-phased research initiative focused on peer relationships and peer programs. It sought to map the current state of knowledge about peer relationships, peer programs and their impact on critical outcomes for middle and high school youth.

In addition to reviewing existing research, the first phase consisted of a qualitative study of four diverse peer programs using a grounded-theory approach. Key research questions included:

1. What are the dynamics of peer relationships, and how do they affect youth development?
2. What elements of peer programs are experienced as contributing to impact?
3. What do participants and leaders see as outcomes of peer programs?

In the second phase, we will apply learning from the first phase to develop and pilot capacity-building tools and outcome measures that can help programs continually improve relational aspects of youth programs to maximize a range of other outcomes. Finally, in the third phase, we will conduct a quasi-experimental study to measure the impact that utilizing these new tools has on outcomes of interest.

## **Study Design**

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### **Participating Program Sites**

This qualitative study focused on four different peer program models, based in middle schools and high schools that are socioeconomically, geographically, racially/ethnically and age diverse. They included:

- An urban high school in California utilizing a program that operates across multiple schools in the district. The program focuses on developing peer leaders to impact their schools. Students are predominantly Latino/a and Asian American, 70 percent of whom are socioeconomically disadvantaged.
- A small town middle school in Iowa that has built an independent peer-helping model focusing on building positive relationships among the peer leaders. The school serves predominantly White, low- and middle-income students.
- A suburban high school in Colorado that offers peer leadership through adventure education. The school serves predominantly White, affluent students.
- An urban high school in New York City that implements a national peer program aimed at easing ninth graders' transition into high school. The school serves predominantly low-income African American and Latino/a students.

### **Methodology**

One or two researchers visited each site for multiple days to observe programming; conduct interviews with program staff; and conduct focus groups with student leaders, youth participants and, in two sites, program alumni. Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed using a grounded-theory approach.

Research questions that guided this process were:

- How are youth relationships with peers experienced and nurtured within the program?
- What do staff and students perceive to be the impact of the programs on their lives and in their schools?
- What program elements are present in diverse programs that appear to be key for program quality and impact?

The analysis employed line-by-line coding of interview and focus group transcripts, developing concise labels describing the essence of statements that offered insight into our research questions.

Two qualitative researchers worked together to name categories of codes that described common phenomena across interviews and focus groups. This led to developing a theory of change (shown in Display 2) that will guide subsequent phases of the research.

This report organizes the findings around the research questions related to critical program elements, relationships, and outcomes.

## Critical Program Elements

The focus groups and interviews surfaced a number of consistent structural, curricular, and philosophical elements deemed critical to program success.

### Student-Centered Philosophy

Adult leaders cultivate this core value by creating comfortable, safe spaces for young people to gather and learn from each other, take risks, and lead. Adults told us that they wanted to create a space where students had a place to “speak up” and where their “opinion and their idea of something is respected.” One student leader said, “In this class, a teacher listens to you, we’re all on the same level.”

Students often choose the discussion topics or activities and projects. One adult leader told us, “They determine, as a group, ‘Here are some issues we’re interested in. . . . Which of these do we want to address over the course of a year?’”

Rows of desks were nowhere to be found, and group sizes were small. Spaces we visited included

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**“When you’re sitting down in a class and the teacher’s standing up, it seems like they have a lot more power. But in our [peer program], we’re all either standing in a circle or all sitting down, so we are all kind of equal.”**

— *Peer program participant*

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couches, beanbag chairs, and young people sitting in circles on the floor or the grass outside. One student leader said this “comfortability” was critical to people getting to know each other, building trust, and letting down their defenses.

### Sequenced Curriculum Grounded in Relational Trust

Although daily activities varied greatly (from activities on a high ropes course, to learning “peer counseling” skills, to organizing students and faculty to change school policies and practices), the curricula at all four sites emphasized relational and skills-based activities. The programs established a safe environment where, as one youth participant put it, “judging . . . [is] literally not allowed.”

The curriculum then systematically built on those activities to strengthen and deepen trust and connections among participants. Starting with “get to know you” games and activities, one youth participant noted, “Slowly our daily talks got a little bit more emotional and a little bit more in-depth . . . so it’s like a process.” An alumnus said, “It sets up an environment where you can take that time and really get to know everybody on a deeper level, and I think that’s why you’re able to build that trust and confidence.”

## System Support and Infrastructure

Staff and students across the sites described the following structural components they believe helped to build and sustain their peer programs.

- Support from the school principal and other senior administrators.
- Dedicated, paid staff to lead the program.
- Frequent interaction, with most student and adult leaders meeting daily, and student leaders meeting at least weekly with other students.
- Recruiting diverse students across social groups within the school.
- Intensive training for staff and student leaders.

## The Role of Relationships

The focus groups and interviews generated extensive data on the ways in which positive relationships are integral to these programs' effectiveness and impact. As one student leader said, "Once you're connected, everything flows. Every activity means more, every word said means something."

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**"A lot of times, you're valued based on your performance in classes and on tests. And while that's important, knowing that, as a teenager, you're not just a grade in a book and an ID number—it's empowering."**

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Consistent with a grounded theory approach, the data analysis began with open coding, or identifying statements of interest and grouping them in categories reflecting what study participants said. Themes grew out of these categories that were clearly aligned with parallel studies underway to understand the nature of developmental relationships in young people's lives, including their relationships with parents, teachers, and mentors. Search Institute research suggests the critical roles that these

"developmental relationships" play in the formation of young people's character strengths, including their identity, sense of agency, and commitment to others and their communities. Because of the close alignment, this research-based framework is used to organize findings from this study.

### Express Care

*Youth feel heard, known, and encouraged. They experience warmth and can rely on the other person in the relationship. They know they are a priority for the other person.*

Staff and peer leaders, and peer leaders and other participants, laughed and had fun together. Youth felt others in the group listened and came to know who they are, making them willing to risk greater self-disclosure. For example, one peer leader said, "A lot of people in this program know there's so much more to me and that I'm not this scary, in-your-face, metal, grungy, crazy cat-lady person. I have passion and I care so much about people." Youth felt accepted and valued. They felt cared for when adult leaders "would check on you and make sure things are okay."

Some youth were willing to risk their own social status to be there for other students. A peer leader said:

*"There are a few kids who . . . people don't normally talk to them, so you're like 'What am I gonna look like, a loser, if I talk to this kid?' But now I just kind of go . . . 'I'm gonna talk to him anyway and make his day better. And if people make fun of me for it, then they're the jerk.'"*

### Challenge Growth

*Youth are expected to live up to their potential. They are held accountable for their actions, and they learn meaningful lessons from their failures or mistakes.*

*Youth are encouraged to stretch beyond what they thought they could accomplish.*

Youth in this study knew adults and older youth saw their potential and expected them to live up to it. Adults and student leaders encouraged growth by challenging others to “fail forward,” taking risks and learning from mistakes.

One youth participant said, “Having an adult say to you, ‘I think you’re capable and I’m not gonna do this for you because I know you can do this’ is a huge thing that I don’t think a lot of teenagers get.” A staff adult observed middle school youth in a peer program calling out students in the school hallways during passing time for using oppressive language. She was impressed they were willing to gamble their social status to stand up for what they believe in.

### **Provide Support**

*Young people are aided in navigating systems and situations. They receive helpful guidance and feedback. Others advocate on their behalf when they need it.*

Young people experienced a myriad of support from adults and other students, such as giving them advice and feedback, helping them obtain resources they needed to achieve their goals, and navigating unfamiliar systems. An adult staff person said:

*I think that’s a big part of what we do, following up with that student, getting resources for them because we do know our students so well. And I would say we make lots of referrals to counselors, therapists, academic advisors, whatever it might be, because a lot comes up in the process of getting to know yourself and getting to know each other.*

### **Share Power**

*People in a relationship take each other seriously by soliciting each other’s ideas and considering those ideas when taking*

*action. In a developmental relationship, youth and adults collaborate to solve problems and accomplish goals. And young people are often encouraged to take the lead.*

Sharing power was evident among youth and adults, and peer leaders and youth with whom they interact. One youth talked about adults acting more as a “facilitator” rather than a “judge.” Adults in these programs were able to take in constructive criticism from youth and re-think their own actions and decisions. They encouraged youth to have a voice and “drive the process.”

A student leader said, “It empowers you to step up to the plate, because you’re not gonna have people there holding your hand through life. You need to step up on your own sometimes and figure things out on your own.”

Adults and youth shared power by listening to and learning from each other, and so did peers. One student leader said about his/her peer group, “We’re all around the same age, except we’re older than them, but we get to learn from each other, which I also think is really cool, cause it’s a learning experience, not only for them, but for us as well.”

### **Expand Possibilities**

*Through relationships, people expose each other to new ideas, experiences, people, and places. An adult or peer often serves as an inspiration for the young person in the relationship to imagine future possibilities for him or herself.*

Students talked about experiences with adults in peer programs as “opening new doors,” while adult leaders talked about intentionally connecting participants with opportunities to grow and “shine.”

In particular, youth appreciated opportunities to take on leadership roles that they said helped to build their confidence. Leaders (both adult and student) inspired participants to strive to be something in

their lives and future careers that they might not otherwise have seen as a goal. A youth participant was impressed by student leaders' efforts to be role models. "If they can do it, I can do it," s/he said.

Participants were exposed to new ideas by getting to know diverse peers. "I associated with people I normally wouldn't have. And it opened my eyes up to other walks of life," one youth said.

## Outcomes of Peer Programs

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Many existing studies focus only on the impact of peer programs on student leaders. This study widens the scope of understanding relationships in peer programs by exploring four levels of impact from the perspectives of program participants and leaders as well as adult staff. These include:

- Individual youth outcomes for peer leaders (e.g., juniors and seniors working with freshmen);
- Outcomes for program participants;
- Outcomes for peer groups themselves; and
- Impact on the schools' climate and culture.

### Youth Outcomes

Across the diverse programs in this study, a core set of character strengths and developmental processes emerged that staff, student leaders, and participants

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**"It makes me aware that I can't slack off. 'Cause if I do, then my freshman will feel, 'Well, if he's doing it, why can't I?' You know? I don't want that, and I don't wanna be a hypocrite."**

— Peer program student leader

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saw as being strengthened through the program.

*Self-Discovery and Awareness.* Peer leaders and participants alike talked about "getting to know themselves." They came to recognize their own strengths and form their own opinions. "Once you

start forming your own opinions," one participant said, "that's when you start forming yourself."

*Broadening Perspectives.* Peer leaders, in particular, talked of "broadening their spectrum of thoughts and opinions" through peer programs.

*Future Orientation.* Student leaders came to think about their future, who they can and who they want to be. One said, "Thinking ahead as to what I'm going to do has been a big thing for me."

*Life Skills.* Peer leaders said they gained a variety of skills that are critical to achieving their goals, including; critical thinking, taking initiative, formatting a plan, managing their time, public speaking, delegating responsibilities, adjusting strategies (and goals) as needed, as well as knowing where and how to get support from others.

*Relational Skills and Dispositions.* In particular, peer leaders and participants developed relational skills critical to achieving their goals. For example, they developed listening, empathy, conversation, and friendship skills. They came to trust others, and to be "more deserving of some people's trust."

*Self-Confidence.* Having a sense of their personal strengths and developing new capacities added to some youth's belief that they "have something to contribute," and that they can achieve their goals. They also gained confidence as leaders. One leader said, "Now I can be taken seriously by anyone."

*Academic Motivation.* As youth came to have a new vision of themselves and new plans for the future, one staff adult said,

"Academics become more important . . . because they have new pride in themselves, it's something they want."

*Leadership Skills and Dispositions.* Both peer leaders and program participants spoke about learning to be "a good role model" and how to "help

others through hard times.” When peer leaders shared what it means to be a leader, they described approaches that reflect ideas of servant leadership or collaborative leadership. They talked about using “gentle guidance,” “setting them up for success,” “helping others solve their problems,” and learning from peer program participants.

*Commitment to Community.* The skills and dispositions outlined here often manifested themselves in youth participants’ and leaders’ belief that they can—and want to—contribute to some good beyond themselves.

Peer leaders felt a powerful sense of responsibility for young people with whom they worked, often calling them “my kids.” Most peer leaders were first participants, who found themselves wanting to do for others what peer leaders had done for them.

*Changing Life Trajectories.* Some program participants, especially peer leaders, believed that the cumulative impact of their experience in their peer program changed their life trajectories. A staff adult said, “People who have depression, who are on the edge of suicide . . . who have drug problems. . . . I’ve . . . seen a lot of people who have literally said to me, ‘This program saved my life.’”

Several program alumni, including one who had been in the program decades ago, said they still use today skills and tools they obtained in the peer program. One alumnus said:

*[The peer program was] truly what got me going on a good path. . . . Without the positive encouragement of my leader and several students in the class and becoming part of a really good community and good culture, there’s no way that I would be where I am today.*

## Group Outcomes

Beyond the outcomes for individual participants, the peer *groups* changed over time, creating a culture that impacted individuals within that group and, ultimately, what they were able to accomplish individually and together.

Peer leaders and participants felt a sense of belonging in the peer program, and forged bonds

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**“Having that extra confidence in yourself gives you the ability to stop thinking about yourself and start thinking about other people. And then you can really start growing.”**  
— Peer program leader

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that held firm outside the program. One participant said, “Without knowing it, you become a family.” Another said, “There’s this weird community that’s like goo that forms within a class.”

They learned about each other, as well as from each other. They came to depend upon and trust one another. They felt their input was valued. One peer leader said, “I never felt lost in that section of my life. . . . I always knew who I could go to if I was having a shit day.”

A staff adult said, “It really provides that connection, that there’s somebody—not an adult, but another student—who actually cares about them. And then, there’s lots of reasons to be in school and stay in school.”

## School Outcomes

Ways in which student and adult participants talked about their peer programs impacting the schools in which they are situated varied, based on the degree to which this was at the heart of their curriculum. Student and adult participants across most of the programs talked about the program strengthening relationships across age groups in their school. One senior peer leader said with pride,

“You know how when ninth graders come to high school, they see us bully them, see us down on them. I like how we’re the seniors and we’re actually helping them. We do the opposite of the cliché story.”

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**The articulated outcomes of these programs closely parallel a growing body of research that points to critical character strengths that drive behavioral outcomes, such as health behaviors or educational attainment.**

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In one program, peer leaders who conducted a workshop for teachers on building better relationships with students said they experienced a new level of respect from adults throughout the school. In another, a principal said adults in the school came to see youth in a different light when they saw them playing an active role in making the school a better place.

## Discussion

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These findings offer a more fine-grained look at outcomes of peer programs, while also illuminating key mechanisms that produce those outcomes. The peer programs in this study used a wide variety of activities to achieve different goals. And yet a host of common inputs and direct outcomes emerged *across* all these programs.

### A Focus on Intermediate Outcomes

Peer programs have tended to focus on demonstrating impact on academic and health goals, with some also measuring impact on social-emotional skills. The outcomes that emerged from conversations with youth and adults in this study included social-emotional skills, and also a range of new *mindsets*. Study participants didn’t talk about increasing graduation rates; decreasing student suspensions; reducing tobacco/drug use or sexually transmitted diseases. These are common goals and documented outcomes for a range of peer programs.

Based on this study, we hypothesize that the direct outcomes identified by participants in this study are *intermediate outcomes* which, ultimately, influence other long-term outcomes for young people, including school success, a healthy lifestyle, a meaningful vocation, and a fulfilling life.

The articulated outcomes of these programs closely parallel a growing body of research that points to critical character strengths that drive other

outcomes, such as healthy behaviors or education. In these peer programs, young people developed a positive sense of *identity*, a sense of who they are, who they can be, and who they want to be in the world. They developed *agency*, a belief that they can achieve their goals and have an impact in the world around them, and adopted behaviors that will make that belief a reality. This is likely driven, at least in part, by new and enhanced social-emotional skills documented in this report, including relational skills, that increase their *actual* capacity to achieve goals. Student leaders and participants expressed a commitment to look out for others, and for a broader community beyond themselves.

Display 1 organizes direct outcomes of peer programs, identified by participants in this study, into these four overarching outcomes: Life Skills, Identity, Agency, and Commitment to Community.

### Documenting Evidence of Impact

As a precursor to investing quantitative measures of program impacts, it is productive first to identify the experienced outcomes through the lived experiences of the leaders, participants, and other stakeholders. This experiential base allows for articulating potential hypotheses that can, in later quantitative studies, document outcomes that are attributable to the program and generalizable to all participants; and also further refine a theory of change that highlights the programmatic factors that impact



## Youth outcomes from peer programs organized by “core” outcomes that fuel a positive developmental journey

Skills	Character Strengths		
	Identity	Agency	Commitment to Community
<p><i>Social-Emotional Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational skills</li> <li>• Planning</li> <li>• Public speaking</li> <li>• Participating in, leading teams</li> <li>• Managing emotions</li> <li>• Challenging themselves to “further extend and grow”</li> <li>• Collaborative leadership</li> </ul> <p><i>Other Skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical thinking</li> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Learning from mistakes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting to know themselves</li> <li>• Finding an “inner voice”</li> <li>• Forming their own opinions</li> <li>• Seeing themselves as leaders</li> </ul>	<p><i>Belief in personal power</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believing they have “something to contribute”</li> <li>• Recognizing strengths</li> <li>• “Braver”</li> <li>• “I can be taken seriously”</li> </ul> <p><i>New behaviors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Thinking ahead as to what I’m going to do”</li> <li>• Taking initiative</li> <li>• Role modeling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Start thinking about other people”</li> <li>• “[It] is on us, as young people, to create that experience for other young people”</li> <li>• “Life is . . . about society and solidarity”</li> </ul>

attitudes, behaviors, and values of interest. These insights can also be mined to enhance and improve programmatic efforts.

### The Central Role of Relationships

Findings in this study suggest that relationships formed within peer programs were a key mechanism for producing the outcomes in Display 1. This includes relationships among youth and adults, and among peers within and beyond the programs.

As is depicted in the Theory of Change shown in Display 2, based on this study’s findings, we hypothesize that program inputs, to some degree, directly produce intermediate outcomes. These are skills, including but not limited to social and emotional skills; and core character strengths, including identity, agency, and commitment to community. Past research associates these intermediate outcomes with the longer-term outcomes programs seek to impact.

And yet program inputs are also intentionally designed to build developmental relationships between and among: adults and youth; peer leaders and participating youth; peers within programs; and, in some cases, throughout the school. The qualitative data suggest that program outcomes are developed, at least in part, *through these relationships*.

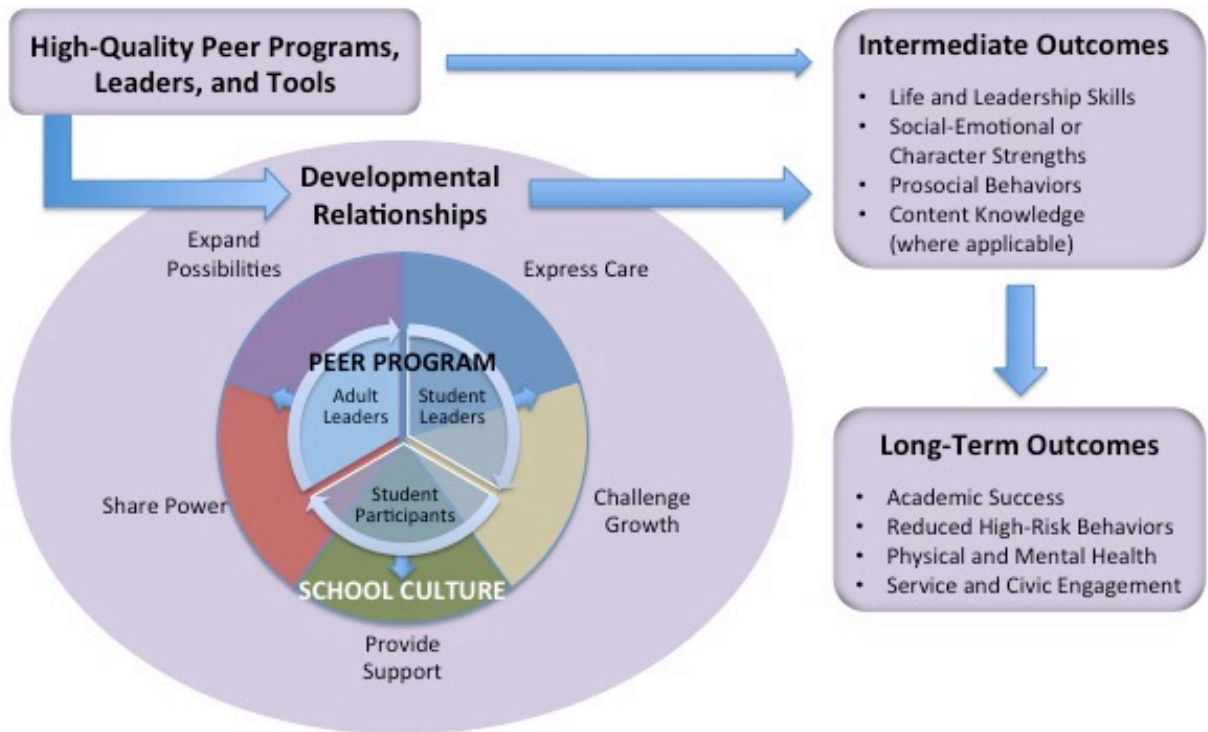
As such, we posit that a focus on building on the strength of the relational aspects of these programs is a possible point of leverage for enhancing outcomes.

### Insights to Strengthen Programs

Learning from this study (and the ongoing research initiative) can inform programs and practices to make the most of these intermediate outcomes to maximize longer-term outcomes they seek to impact. It tells us what these outcomes look like in action, and how youth talk about them. Both can help inform tools to measure these outcomes and inform ongoing program refinement to maximize outcomes.

Display 2 **How Peer Programs Work by Building Relationships—  
A Preliminary Theory of Change**

Below is a theory of change that was derived from the analysis of qualitative data from peer program participants and leaders. It hypothesizes that program inputs produce intermediate outcomes directly; and by intentionally building developmental relationships, *through* which student leaders and participants develop intermediate outcomes. Developmental relationships are built between adult and student leaders, among student leaders, between student leaders and participants, among student participants and, in some cases, throughout the school. Past research associates these intermediate outcomes with longer-term outcomes that peer programs seek to impact.



**Beyond Peer Programs**

What about settings where there is not currently a peer program? This study suggests strategies that might be used in a variety of settings where peers are working together, guided and facilitated by caring adults, to achieve common goals. They are

applicable in classrooms, sports teams, clubs and other extracurricular activities (e.g. yearbook, student council), in faith-based youth groups and in other community settings. This study paves the way for focused interventions as well as for new research in all of these settings.

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