Don't Forget the Families

The Missing Piece in America's Effort to Help All Children Succeed

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Discovering what kids need to succeed

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Don't Forget the Families: The Missing Piece in America's Effort to Help All Children Succeed

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Methodological information and technical tables for this study are available in the Technical Appendix, which is available from www.search-institute.org/dff

Acknowledgments

The perspectives and expertise of many different people enrich every research project. That truth is underscored with this report, which introduces Search Institute's newest work on developmental relationships. In addition to the efforts needed to conduct the study that is the focus of this report, many other individuals and organizations have been part of our work to conceptualize our approach to developmental relationships.

Numerous Search Institute staff members participated in various stages of this research project, from early focus groups to survey administration and data analysis to logistical support throughout. Our thanks to the following colleagues in particular: Janice DeWall, Samantha MacDonald, Justin Roskopf, Jenna Sethi, Ph.D., Teresa Sullivan, Ed.D., Rick Trierweiler, and Chen-Yu Wu.

We also benefitted from the dedication and energy of several research interns. Thanks to MerLynne Byrne, Louisa Richardson-Deppe, Alyssa Meuwissen, and Kaitlin Peterson, each of whom provided critical support for various parts of this research project.

Half a dozen organizations and schools in different parts of the country recruited and hosted the focus groups and facilitated the interviews needed to develop and refine survey measures. We promised these organizations anonymity for the research project, so we will not list them here. We appreciate their generosity of time, hospitality, and commitment to children, youth, and families.

Perhaps most important, we deeply appreciate the youth, parenting adults, youth practitioners, educators, and community members who provided the keen and powerful insights that served as the foundation for the developmental relationships framework, and, subsequently, to the parenting adults who took the time to complete the survey that is the foundation of this report.

Finally, we wish to thank the many leaders and collaborators who work in education, youth development, and family support who are allies with us in focusing energy on cultivating the relationships that nurture key character strengths and well-being in children and youth. In the end, our frameworks and studies have value and impact through your work. We hope you find this report and the related projects we will launch in the months and years ahead both interesting and useful.

Summary of Key Findings

Preparing all children and youth to live productive and fulfilling lives is a critical responsibility and opportunity for society. Thanks in part to a recent movement for collective impact, schools, programs, and entire communities are increasingly working together to achieve that objective.

However, with important exceptions, many of those efforts struggle to engage families meaningfully, much less as full partners. This gap leaves one of the most powerful influences in the lives of children and youth on the sidelines.

Part of the challenge is that too many institutions and professionals have largely given up on families, believing that the challenges families face and the problems they sometimes create are beyond their reach and responsibility. As a result, sometimes those institutions ignore families. Other times they set up systems and supports that compensate for the failures they perceive in families. And even when schools and programs do engage families, they typically focus on asking parents to support the work of the school or program through activities such as serving on committees, helping with homework, fundraising, and volunteering to lead programs.

All of these approaches—from ignoring family engagement altogether to involving parents in the work of schools and programs—overlook the one thing about which parents care deeply and that can powerfully benefit their children's development: relationships in the home.

Based on a study of 1,085 U.S. parenting adults of 3 to 13 year olds, *Don't Forget the Families* makes the case that strengthening family *relationships* is a critical but undervalued strategy for helping children learn and grow up successfully. It introduces a framework of developmental relationships, which articulates concrete actions that families can intentionally embrace and consistently practice that help children develop the character strengths they need as they grow up. In the process, this report offers a fresh, potentially powerful approach to unleashing the capacities of families to be more active contributors to the schools, organizations, and communities that serve their children.

What are developmental relationships?

Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people develop the character strengths to discover who they are, gain the ability to shape their own lives, and learn how to interact with and contribute to others. These relationships are characterized by five essential actions, each of which is described from the perspective of a young person:

1. **Express Care:** Show that you like me and want the best for me.
2. **Challenge Growth:** Insist that I try to continuously improve.
3. **Provide Support:** Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.
4. **Share Power:** Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.
5. **Expand Possibility:** Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.

How are families doing?

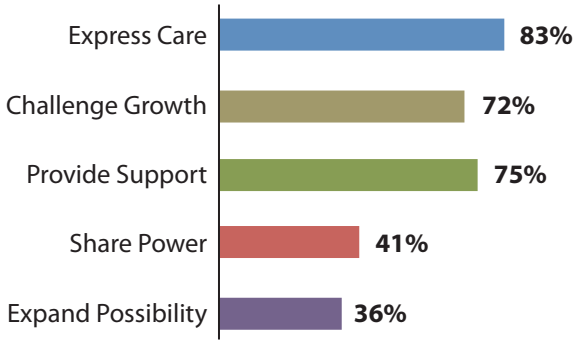
At least seven out of ten parenting adults with children ages 3 to 13 reported that they take the following actions in their relationships with children frequently and effectively: Express Care, Provide Support, and Challenge Growth (Display 1). The two remaining actions are taken less often and less effectively: Share Power and Expand Possibility.

This report shows that families from all backgrounds experience similar levels of developmental relationships.

Display 1

Developmental relationships in families

Percentages of the parenting adults surveyed whose responses yielded a score of 75% or higher (proposed as an optimal level) for the five essential actions in developmental relationships.



Parenting adults were as likely to report developmental relationships across differences of race or Hispanic ethnicity, education, household income, immigrant status, sexual orientation, and community size.

That said, this study also highlights some important differences in families' experience of developmental relationships. It finds that developmental relationships were *less common* for:

- older children (within the sample of 3 to 13 year olds);
- parenting adults who are stepparents;
- boys compared to girls; and
- families that have financial struggles.

Why developmental relationships matter

When parenting adults reported that they have stronger relationships with their children, they were also more likely to report that their children are on track in several areas of development, including key character strengths, such as taking responsibility, managing emotions, and being concerned for others (Display 2).

Within the five essential actions in a developmental relationship, the one that is most consistently and strongly associated with positive development is Share Power. This finding suggests that Sharing Power may be particularly catalytic for propelling children and youth on a positive life path.

Critical shifts for the future

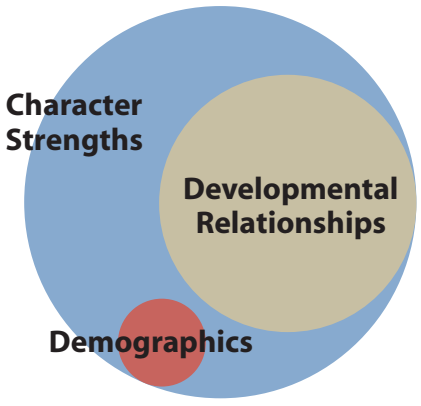
If taken seriously, this study's findings raise two sets of important, interlocking questions about how we focus energy in in local, state, and national efforts to help all children succeed. The first questions focus on how we move beyond platitudes about the importance of relationships in young people's lives. How do we become much more intentional and specific about the kinds of relationships kids need at home, at school, and in other places they spend time?

The second set of question revolves around our assumptions about families, their roles in young people's lives, and the fundamental ways schools, organizations, and systems relate to parenting adults and families. Do

Display 2

Predicting young people's character strengths

Developmental relationships in families play a powerful role in children's growth. Based on analyses of the association between overall developmental relationships and a composite measure of character strengths, developmental relationships in families contribute 42% of the difference in parents' reports of key character strengths. Demographics such as income, race or Hispanic ethnicity, and family composition contribute 4% of the variance.



Note: Based on stepwise regression analysis.

we truly believe that all kinds of families matter, and are we willing to invest in unleashing and reinforcing their capacities to ensure that children have the relationships, supports, and opportunities they need?

When schools, organizations, and networks do reinvest in engaging families, it cannot be business as usual. Six shifts are needed in the approaches taken to recognize and engage with families as important actors and full partners in nurturing key character strengths and supporting children's success in school and life. These shifts call leaders in organizations, communities, and nations to:

1. Listen first to families rather than just developing and sending messages that don't resonate or motivate.
2. Focus on building relationships with families, rather than only providing programs.
3. Highlight families' strengths, even amid challenges, rather than adopting and designing approaches based on negative stereotypes.
4. Encourage families to experiment with new practices that fit their lives, rather than giving them expert advice on what they need to do.
5. Emphasize parenting as a relationship more than a set of techniques.
6. Broaden coalitions focused on young people's success to actively engage families as a focal point for strengthening developmental relationships.

Tips and relationship-building activities for families together

As a starting point in responding to these findings, the report concludes with a sampling of concrete ideas and activities that families can use to explore developmental relationships. These ideas illustrate that families do this through the everyday ways they interact with, care for, and invest in their relationships together.

These tips and relationship-building activities offer practical steps forward in implementing two of the shifts that schools, organizations, and coalitions need to make: Recognizing parenting as a relationship, and encouraging families to experiment with new practices together. These approaches are integral to Search Institute's website, www.ParentFurther.com, which features more than 100 family activities based on the developmental relationships framework. As a next step, Search Institute will partner with schools and other organizations to utilize these principles and tools in listening to, building relationships with, and providing supports for families as partners in ensuring that all children and youth have the opportunity to grow up successfully.

The potential for impact

This report joins a growing body of evidence that shows the powerful role of relationships and social capital in building community and addressing inequities. This research reinforces the call for both strengthening the developmental and relational infrastructure while also working to counteract the structural injustices that are all too pervasive.

Though this report focuses on relationships in families, the broader vision highlights the power and need to understand and strengthen a web of important adult and peer relationships across all areas of kids' lives.

The good news is that there is a rich but perhaps untapped reservoir of relational power across the economic and cultural spectrum in the United States. It is already playing a big role in children's lives. It lies in the families, schools, programs, neighborhoods, communities, and virtual spaces where our children and youth live and learn. With intentionality, it has even more potential to address the challenges that young people face while also nurturing in them key character strengths that are foundational for success in life.

1 Reclaiming and Refocusing Family Engagement

Families profoundly shape the lives of children and youth. Yet, too often, they are left on the sidelines in school, organizational, and community-wide efforts to improve young people's outcomes.

TAKEAWAYS

- Efforts to prepare children and youth to live productive and fulfilling lives too often fail to fully engage families as partners.
- Part of the challenge is to refocus family engagement approaches on what motivates families to invest themselves and where they have the most impact on their children's learning and development.
- Focusing family engagement on building developmental relationships offers a fresh approach to family engagement.

Preparing children and youth to live productive and fulfilling lives, both now and in the future, is the most important responsibility we face today. Not only do too many children face daunting obstacles in growing up, but our individual and collective well-being depends on how young people are engaged, supported, and prepared to face challenges and to open up possibilities for themselves and for society.

Many schools and other educational institutions, out-of-school programs, community coalitions, and others are undertaking innovative approaches to prepare young people to be part of the solutions at the local, state, and federal levels. As part of recent national attention on working together for "collective impact" (Kania & Kramer, 2011), schools, programs, and entire communities are increasingly collaborating to achieve shared goals and priorities.

However, with important exceptions, these and other efforts **struggle to engage parents and families meaningfully, much less as full partners.** Students typically report low levels of parent involvement in their schooling and participation in school activities, especially as children grow older (Benson et al., 2011). **This gap leaves one of the most powerful influences in the lives of children and youth on the sidelines.**

Part of the challenge is that too many institutions and professionals have given up on families, focusing exclusively on the struggles families face and the problems they create. We then put our energy and resources into setting up systems and supports that compensate for the failures we perceive in families.

In addition, leaders have mostly asked families to support institutions in doing their jobs by helping with homework or volunteering to help with programs. Too often, family engagement efforts focus only on enlisting parents as "teachers" to reinforce classroom learning or as supporters of what we do in our child and youth programs.

Those engagement efforts frequently founder because many parents have neither the desire nor the capacity to teach children academic content (how to do math) or the time to add another volunteer assignment to their lives.

However, the vast majority of parenting adults do have the desire and capacity to build stronger relationships with their children. Recognizing, tapping, and strengthening this capacity lie at the heart of this study's call to action.

The power of families in child and youth outcomes

Families matter for virtually every child and youth outcome. The ways relationships form and develop in families have a tremendous influence on how young people grow up (Heckman, 2008; Kuczynski, 2003; Laursen & Collins, 2009; Steinberg, 2001; Syvertsen, Roehlkepartain, & Scales, 2012; Tuttle, Knudson-Martin, & Kim, 2012).

For example, studies have shown that authoritative parenting that balances high expectations with a relationship defined by respect, open communication, and warmth has been empirically linked to better school performance and academic engagement (Steinberg et al., 1992), decreased internalization of problems such as depression (Gray & Steinberg, 1999), and lower psychological distress and delinquency (Lamborn et al., 1991).

Research also shows that interventions that strengthen families could powerfully influence young people's lives. Scholars at the Brookings Institution analyzed a major federal study that followed more than 5,000 children from birth into adulthood (Reeves & Howard, 2013). When parents used effective parenting practices (such as expressing warmth and using effective discipline), 72% of children achieved all of the following during adolescence: graduated from high school with at least a 2.5 GPA; were not convicted of a crime; and did not become a teen parent. In contrast, only about 30% of those children with parents who did not employ effective parenting practices reached these benchmarks.

The researchers concluded that by increasing the level of relational support by those parents with the weakest parenting practices, 12.5% fewer of their children would become teen parents and 8% fewer would be convicted of a crime by age 19 (Reeves & Howard, 2013). Although changes of about 10% may not seem like much, they are dramatic over a lifetime and would save millions in remediation costs for society (Heckman, 2008). Strengthening parent-child relationships has potential to have a significant impact on children's well-being and life course.

The family engagement gap

Given the central role of families in shaping children's lives, the value of engaging, supporting, and educating families could be seen as self-evident. But with changes in families, the economy, education, and human services in the 20th century (Arcus, 1995; Bengston, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002), expectations of the way families connect with schools, youth programs, and other institutions have shifted (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

We're okay, you're not okay

One reason for our underinvestment in families may be the widespread perception that many families are dysfunctional and even hopeless. Changes in family structure and family life have led some observers, advocates, and the public to characterize the state of families today as bad and getting worse. For example, a 2012 survey of 2,904 U.S. parents of school-aged children (age 5 to 18) by the University of Virginia found that 64% of parents said the quality of family life had declined since they were growing up (Bowman et al., 2012).

In reality, there is little evidence that families have lost their power in the lives of children and youth—even though many families do face major challenges. The same University of Virginia study found that most parents are quite happy with their own families (Bowman et al., 2012). A 2010 survey of 2,691 U.S. adults by the Pew Research Center similarly found that 76% said their family is the most important element of their lives, and 75% said they are very satisfied with their family (Taylor, 2010). Apparently, the problems are in other people's families, not necessarily their own (Bowman et al., 2012).

Longitudinal evidence suggests that it is more accurate to describe families as changing, not declining. Drawing from data collected across 26 years from youth

and parents in two generations, Bengston, Biblarz, and Roberts (2002) examined changes in family life from the 1970s through the 1990s. They found that family influence remained strong throughout these decades, and levels of maternal engagement remained strong. They concluded:

> Families still matter greatly, and families can and do tend to perform well those functions that are particularly relevant to the lives of children, even in different social and historical contexts, household arrangements, and living conditions. (p. 156)

Families on the sidelines

Yet, family engagement (or parent involvement) has become an optional, reinforcing activity for the so-called real learning, which occurs in school or other settings. Programmatic efforts too often give the impressions that parents are the supporting cast, not primary actors in children's learning and development.

This mindset is evident in a number of contemporary examples in education and youth development. For example, our review of the work of many community-wide partnerships that are pursuing the strategy of "collective impact" found that relatively few actively engage parents and families as essential members of the collective. To be sure, many schools and youth development organizations have developed explicit strategies for engaging families. But frequently they focus on getting parents to help them achieve their institutional agendas (with messages such as "we need volunteers" or "help your kids with the homework we assign").

In the end, the dots rarely connect. Child- and youth-focused collaborations, schools, and organizations build strategies and systems that assume families will play minor roles, at best, in their efforts. When families are mentioned, it is often to place blame on them for not doing their job. Or they are asked to do things that are mismatched with their own priorities or strengths.

Does family engagement really work?

As a result of such disconnection, family engagement efforts often do not have the intended impact, leaving questions about their value. Consider these headlines from two widely circulated articles:

Parental Involvement Is Overrated
(*New York Times*, April 12, 2014)
Don't Help Your Kids with Their Homework
(*Atlantic Monthly*, March 2014)

The authors of the *New York Times* article, both sociologists, analyzed three decades of federal longitudinal data and concluded:

> Most people, asked whether parental involvement benefits children academically, would say, "of course it does." But evidence from our research suggests otherwise. In fact, most forms of parental involvement, like observing a child's class, contacting a school about a child's behavior, helping to decide a child's high school courses, or helping a child with homework, do not improve student achievement. In some cases, they actually hinder it. (Robinson & Harris, 2014b)

There are reasons to be skeptical that parent involvement is a panacea for addressing educational and other goals in society. Part of the challenge, most experts agree, is that family engagement (or, more often, parent involvement) often relies on practices that may have much less impact on student achievement, such as attending school activities, meeting with teachers, or helping with homework. Put bluntly, **too many family engagement efforts focus on getting families to help the institution achieve its priorities (or to comply with regulations), rather than on supporting families in working toward shared goals and aspirations for their children.**

For example, the California Department of Education's detailed framework for family engagement illustrates the current state of family engagement policies and practices. It outlines what schools and districts must do to comply with parent involvement requirements and regulations, part of which include how to communicate with parents about how they can assist with homework, participate in school decision making, and navigate school and district systems (California Department of Education, 2014). These strategies are unlikely to fully engage the interests and energies of many parents—especially

those who face the difficulties of living in poverty and navigating challenges of raising children today.

It is not surprising then that an analysis of Title I[1] parent involvement requirements found a consistent decline in practices that focus on "building the capacity of families and school personnel to create and sustain partnerships that support children's learning and development" (Mapp, 2012, p. 3). Over time, the programs emphasized compliance, rather than improvement and impact. Thus, significant federal investments in and mandates for family engagement may have done little to contribute to student outcomes—not because families don't matter, but because of what they are asked to do and how the initiatives have been implemented.

There are, of course, a new generation of frameworks, strategies, and innovations aimed at strengthening family engagement across sectors. For example, SEDL (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory) and the U.S. Department of Education in 2013 released a new framework for school-family partnerships that seeks to build the capacity of both educational institutions and families to more effectively work together (Mapp & Kutter, 2013). With this study, Search Institute joins these other efforts to refocus and reimagine family engagement in ways that recognize the capacities of families and meaningfully enhance young people's lives.

The challenges of family engagement

Numerous factors contribute to the gaps in the ways schools, organizations, and community coalitions do engage families. Indeed, teachers describe it as one of the most challenging aspects of their work (Markow, Macia, & Lee, 2012). Practical issues such as time, schedule, transportation, and costs dominate conversations among professionals, and these are important barriers for many families. In addition, a number of personal and interpersonal factors are likely more significant than the logistical factors (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Attree, 2005; Wittaker & Cowley, 2012). These include:

- perceived stigma, embarrassment, or a sense of failure, with parents worrying that they will be judged, blamed, or labeled as inadequate parents, or diagnosed for seeking help or support for parenting issues;
- loss of privacy or outside interference in family life; and
- a sense that the opportunities or services available did not meet the family's needs.

Leaders in the field of family engagement challenge the stereotype of hard-to-reach parents and families, which is often used as code language for large groups of families, such as the poor, people of color, and immigrants. Rather, Mapp and Hong (2010) see a "fundamental disconnect between what is designed and offered and what families want and need. . . . In other words, it is our institutions and the programs, practices, and policies that school personnel design that are 'hard to reach,' not the families" (p. 346). These authors press for a shift from dealing with the technical problems of "hard-to-reach" parents, such as transportation and schedules toward addressing the adaptive or systemic challenges that require experiments, discovery, and change in attitudes and beliefs.

Refocusing the why and how of family engagement

Don't Forget the Families takes up that challenge, proposing to refocus family engagement for greater reach and impact based on the perspectives, priorities, and strengths of families. This refocusing changes both the *why* and the *how* of many organizations and coalitions engage families today:

- By the *why* of engaging families, we mean the ends toward which we seek to engage families. Rather than tying family engagement to institutional goals (such as improving test scores or increasing youth participation in programs), we propose focusing family engagement on reinforcing families' central role in helping children and youth develop character strengths through which they discover who they are, their power to shape their own development, and why they matter in their families, communities, and world. These character strengths

1 Title I, part of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families. See: www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html

lay the foundation for thriving in life, avoiding high-risk behaviors, succeeding in school, being ready for work, and being civically engaged.

- The suggested approach also shifts the *how* of engaging families: from emphasizing the tactical ways families reinforce what happens in schools or programs to **supporting families in building developmental relationships**.

The theory of change that underpins this study is shown in Display 3. This preliminary model emphasizes developmental relationships as a primary catalyst for nurturing young people's character strengths, a case that will be made in Chapter 4.

These two shifts in focus—to developmental relationships and the development of character strengths—hold the promise of more active and authentic parent involvement and improved outcomes for young people. The national survey of 1,085 parenting adults that is the heart of this report provides evidence of this potential. This shift in focus has the following benefits:

- It emphasizes the **strengths and capacities of families** in their homes and communities, which are centered in their relationships. Chapter 2 introduces a new framework of developmental relationships, and Chapter 3 highlights the relational strengths and challenges present across 1,085 diverse families in the United States.
- It resonates with the **priorities and aspirations of parenting adults** from across the ideological, economic, and cultural spectrum in the United States. As we show in Chapter 4, strengthened developmental relationships are associated with many of the developmental goals that parents and other adults hold for children.
- It builds the **social-emotional, noncognitive, or character strengths** that are foundational for learning, working, and contributing in a complex global economy and society. Chapter 4 also highlights the connections Search Institute found between developmental relationships and several measures of educational engagement and social-emotional well-being.
- Rather than focusing on the goals of a particular sector or institution in communities (such as schools), it focuses on both strategies and goals that can **build public will and investment across sectors and institutions** in order to catalyze and sustain collective commitment, action, and impact.

This refocusing begins first by understanding the strengths, challenges, and priorities of families. It starts with listening to and understanding their experiences. Out of the lived experiences of diverse families can grow strategies and initiatives that generate collective action and impact—with families as active agents in improving outcomes for children and youth.

What this report offers

Don't Forget the Families provides the first-ever national portrait of developmental relationships in families with children ages 3 to 13. It documents the connections between developmental relationships and children developing key character strengths and well-being. It explores five overarching questions:

1. How do families experience developmental relationships? How do experiences of developmental relationships vary among different families in our society? (Chapter 3)
2. To what extent do developmental relationships contribute to children's development and well-being across different types of families and circumstances? (Chapter 4)
3. What everyday interactions in families facilitate (or interfere with) developmental relationships? (Chapter 5)
4. What strategies hold promise for engaging families through a focus on developmental relationships? (Chapter 6)
5. What can families do together to enhance their developmental relationships? (Chapter 7)

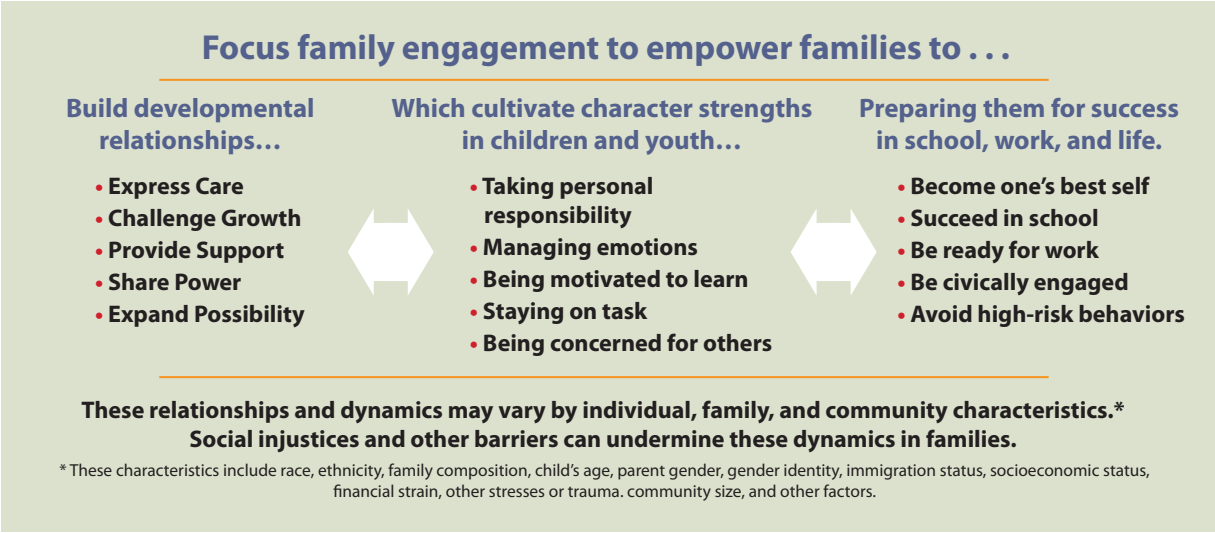
Expanding the web of relationships—with families at the center

The report begins by introducing Search Institute's new framework of developmental relationships, which articulates the potential of these relationships as catalysts for young people's development, learning, and well-being.

Display 3

Refocusing family engagement: A simplified theory of change

This simplified theory of change provides an overview of the underlying hypothesis for this study. Bidirectional arrows are reminders that the relationships are likely interactional. Cause-and-effect association cannot be established through this initial cross-sectional study. Future Search Institute studies will investigate the degree to which developmental relationships cause the development of character strengths and the attainment of positive outcomes in school and other aspects of children's lives.



This report focuses on parent-child relationships within families with children ages 3 to 13. It also points toward a broader research and action agenda aimed at surrounding young people in a supportive web of many developmental relationships in families, schools, programs, and communities. Forthcoming and pending studies will examine developmental relationships between:

- **children older than those examined in this study and parents** (including similarities and differences in the perspectives of teenagers and their parents);
- **students and their teachers;**
- **same-age and near-peers**;
- **mentors and youth mentees**;
- **youth and adult leaders** in youth programs.

Each of these (and other) relationships likely has a different character, with each complementing others. Over time, Search Institute is seeking opportunities to understand and strengthen the unique webs of relationships that young people have and need in different contexts and circumstances. In doing so, we hope to gain insights that shed light on the overall framework and how developmental relationships are manifested in different contexts. (For more information on this broader research and action agenda on developmental relationships, see the Technical Appendix.)

By articulating specific strategies and actions that make relationships developmental, the developmental relationships framework invites key stakeholders in young people's lives to identify tangible, specific, and measurable ways they can be more intentional in cultivating relationships that really matter in kids' lives.

2 Getting Real about Relationships: A Framework for Action

Search Institute's framework of developmental relationships identifies essential actions for building relationships that help children grow up successfully.

Embracing a goal as broad and ambitious as developing character strengths raises the critical question of how that objective can be achieved. Programmatic and structural solutions such as new policies, programs, or curricula have roles to play. But ultimately no program or curriculum can, in itself, help young people learn and begin to thrive. Instead, based on growing evidence, we hypothesize that cultivating character strengths is most powerfully shaped through close relationships between young people and trustworthy adults and peers in their families, schools, and communities.

We, along with other researchers (e.g., Li & Julian, 2012), describe these transformative relationships as *developmental relationships*. Expanding on others' approaches, our **working definition is as follows**:

Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people develop the character strengths to discover who they are, gain the ability to shape their own lives, and learn how to interact with and contribute to others.

Through a series of formative research projects (described in the Technical Appendix), we at Search Institute have identified five *essential actions* that make a relationship developmental. They are:

1. Express Care
2. Challenge Growth
3. Provide Support
4. Share Power
5. Expand Possibility

This first Search Institute quantitative study of developmental relationships focuses on developmental relationships between parenting adults[2] and their children. However, family relationships are not the only important relationships—and parenting adult-child relationships are not the only important relationships in families. Other people also matter. Indeed, young people have the best chance of developing character strengths when they are

TAKEAWAYS

- Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people develop character strengths that shape their identity, agency, and commitment to community.
- Researchers, parents, and youth all recognize the power of relationships.
- Search Institute's framework of developmental relationships highlights five strategies that are part of a developmental relationship: Express Care; Challenge Growth; Provide Support; Share Power; and Expand Possibility

2 A parenting adult is an adult who, regardless of their biological relationship, assumes responsibility for a child.

supported by developmental relationships with adults and peers across all areas of their lives (Center for Promise, 2015; Olson, DeFrain, & Skogrand, 2008; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015; Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006; Scales, 2003; Walsh, 2003).

Beyond 'caring' adults

To assert the importance of close relationships may seem merely to state the obvious. Educators, child-care providers, youth development professionals, family educators, researchers, policy makers, and others often highlight the importance of caring adults in the lives of young people.

However, our conception of *developmental* relationships includes but presses beyond the current retoric on *caring* adults in important ways:

1. Caring, though essential and even foundational, is not the only thing that matters in developmental relationships. Our research suggests that, along with expressing care, developmental relationships include an emphasis on challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibility in order to most effectively cultivate character strengths in young people.
2. The construction of "caring adult," in which *caring* modifies *adult*, implies that being a caring person is state of being, not the result of deliberate and intentional actions. Thus, some people are caring; others are not, and we have to put our energy into finding and engaging those who are already caring.
3. Finally, this construction also limits the relational capacity to adults, overlooking the powerful capacity of peers to contribute to each other's development. Recognizing and strengthening the capacity of young people to be resources for and with each other can unleash tremendous developmental capacity in young people's lives. Although this study focused on developmental relationships with adults (in this case, parenting adults) and young people, Search Institute has also launched a study of developmental relationships among peers.

The developmental relationships framework

Through two years of conducting focus groups with youth, parents, educators, and youth workers; reviewing existing research; and analyzing existing data (see the Technical Appendix), Search Institute has created a first-generation framework that encompasses the actions that define a developmental relationship (Display 4). Our goal is to unpack the elements of a relationship that really matter for developing character strengths and other positive academic and social-emotional outcomes.

The framework articulates five *essential actions* that are foundational for developmental relationships, and then articulates a set of more specific and tangible *action steps* through which each of the broader essential actions is operationalized. In the most transformative relationships, all of these actions are bidirectional, with each person contributing to and benefitting from the habitual and intentional practice of these actions. For the purpose of clarity, however, the framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person in a developmental relationship.

The essential actions and the action steps articulated in this framework were selected based on a large body of research in psychology, sociology, education, and other fields. (See the Selected Research Bibliography.) Display 5 highlights a number of prominent researchers' perspectives on the importance of relationships.

In addition, each action in the Developmental Relationships framework is relevant for diverse populations (though different cultures take these actions differently), and the public broadly endorses each. Display 6 highlights some of the ways parenting adults talked about these relational actions in focus groups.

Our initial study of parenting adults with children ages 3 to 13 (the focus of this report) suggests broad agreement among parenting adults about the priority of the five essential actions in the developmental relationships framework, as shown in Display 7. From (1) "not a priority" to (10) "highest priority," the average rating for each of the five essential actions in the developmental relationships framework was eight or higher. Thus, this framework resonates highly with parenting adults, offering a shared vision for learning and action.

Display 4

Search Institute's developmental relationships framework

This framework of developmental relationships—which will continue to be refined based on ongoing research—identifies five essential actions supported by a total of 20 action steps that contribute to young people developing key character strengths and achieve a range of positive life outcomes. Each action is bidirectional, with each person being influenced by and influencing the other person. For the purpose of clarity, however, the framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person in a developmental relationship.

Express Care: Show that you like me and want the best for me.

- **Listen**—Pay attention when you are with me.
- **Be Warm**—Let me know that you like being with me and express positive feelings toward me.
- **Invest**—Commit time and energy to doing things for and with me.
- **Show Interest**—Make it a priority to understand who I am and what I care about.
- **Be Dependable**—Be someone I can count on and trust.

Challenge Growth: Insist that I try to continuously improve.

- **Inspire**—Help me see future possibilities for myself.
- **Expect**—Make it clear that you want me to live up to my potential.
- **Stretch**—Recognize my thoughts and abilities while also pushing me to strengthen them.
- **Limit**—Hold me accountable for appropriate boundaries and rules.

Provide Support: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

- **Encourage**—Praise my efforts and achievements.
- **Guide**—Provide practical assistance and feedback to help me learn.
- **Model**—Be an example I can learn from and admire.
- **Advocate**—Stand up for me when I need it.

Share Power: Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.

- **Respect**—Take me seriously and treat me fairly.
- **Negotiate**—Give me a voice in making decisions that affect me.
- **Respond**—Understand and adjust to my needs, interests, and abilities.
- **Collaborate**—Work with me to accomplish goals and solve problems.

Expand Possibility: Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.

- **Explore**—Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.
- **Connect**—Introduce me to people who can help me grow.
- **Navigate**—Help me work through barriers that could stop me from achieving my goals.

Display 5

The power of relationships: Researchers' perspectives

Across a number of disciplines and studies, there is a growing awareness of the catalytic roles that relationships play in affecting young people's lives. These quotes illustrate the conclusions of a range of studies by a variety of researchers in different fields.

"Every kid needs at least one adult who is crazy about him or her."
— Bronfenbrenner (1970, p. 5)

"Positive relationships with adults are perhaps the single most important ingredient in promoting positive student development. For example, when teachers learn to make modest efforts to form a personal connection with their adolescent students—such that the students feel known—they can dramatically enhance student motivation in school and emotional functioning outside of school."
— Pianta, Hamre, & Allen (2012, p. 370)

"Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the **everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources** in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, **in their families and relationships, and in their communities."**
— Masten (2001, p. 235)

"Relationships are the oxygen of human development."
— Benson (2008, p. 46)

"The **effectiveness** of child-serving programs, practices, and policies is **determined first and foremost by whether they strengthen or weaken developmental relationships**. . . . When developmental relationships are prevalent, development is promoted, and when this type of relationship is not available or is diluted, interventions show limited effects."
— Li & Julian (2012, pp. 157, 159)

"If we could see the world through the eyes of a child, **at the center of that world are the relationships** that mediate many important influences from the broader world and through which that world is understood and experienced."
— Thompson (2014, p. 1917)

"Relationships are the soil in which children's SEL (social-emotional learning) skills grow. **Parent-child relationships are the first and arguably most important context** for the development of these skills, but relationships in schools—with both teachers and peers—are also important."
— Jones & Boffard (2012, p. 9)

"The common feature of successful interventions across all stages of the life cycle through adulthood is that they promote attachment and provide a secure base for exploration and learning for the child. **Successful interventions emulate the mentoring environments offered by successful families."**
— Heckman & Kautz (2013, p. ii)

"Almost without exception, theories of psychological well-being include **positive relationships** with others as a **core element of mental health and well-being."**
— Reis & Gable (2003, p. 129)

Display 6

Voices from the study: Parenting adults describe what they do to build developmental relationships

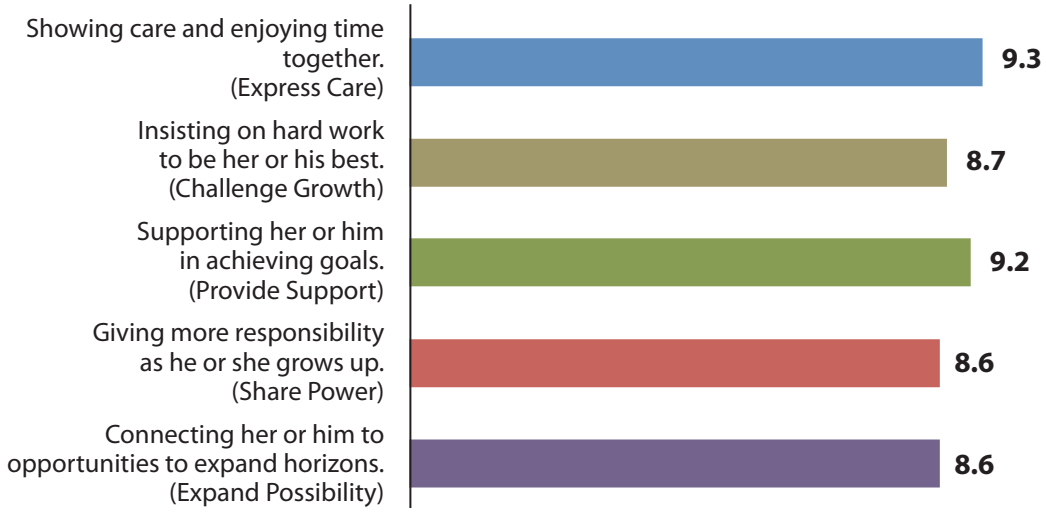
These quotes come from focus groups with parenting adults that were held to inform the creation of the developmental relationships framework. (See the Technical Appendix for information on the focus groups.)

Express Care	"The greatest things ever invented in the world—ever—started with a conversation. And that ultimately leads to the relationships we have."	"You have to listen. You have to listen to their thought process and let the silence do all the heavy lifting for you."
Challenge Growth	"Having high expectations means a lot in our house. You know? An 'F because you didn't try' is not the same as an 'F and you gave everything you had.'"	"I think when you think of 'supporting' you think of a positive connotation, of lifting up. And I would suggest that the support is sometimes quite the opposite. You have to be the gatekeeper, you have to be the rule maker. You have to be "Turn off your light, it's 10 o'clock. You will go to bed." "I think a big part of showing love for me is to set boundaries, rules."
Provide Support	"I've made it my goal that I will be there 150% for her, no matter what. I don't care what we have to go through, we'll be there. You know? I'll give her the shirt off my back to show her that she's always got us." "I think being real and showing them that you make mistakes too helps them to be inspired to say, 'Oh, I can still do this, I've seen her fail. And so I can do it. I can make this.'"	"You really have to model what you want. And if you want your kids to be proud of their accomplishments, then you need to be proud of ... your accomplishments. If you want them to be empathetic or if you want them to be community driven, you have to get out there and do that with them. You've got to walk the walk if you're gonna talk the talk."
Share Power	"Well, you're setting them up for failure if you always help them with everything they do, because they won't know how to do anything when it comes time, because you've always, 'Oh, here, let me know you do this,' or 'Let me help you do that.' You think you're supporting them, but really you're hurting them because they're not getting the skills that they need, that they're going to need later in life."	"Respect them. And expect them to respect you in return."
Expand Possibility	"I believe in him just as much as he believes in me. So I try to support him by being interested in what he likes, and trying it out."	"We've built a network of friends that are just like our family. And both my daughters know that those people are behind them, just like I am."

Display 7

Developmental relationships: High priority for parenting adults

In our survey of 1,085 parenting adults with children ages 3 to 13, we asked participants to indicate how much of a priority each of the following essential actions is for them as a parent. Responses were on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest priority. All five were rated 8 or higher.



Underlying principles of developmental relationships

In shaping this framework, we sought to reflect a set of principles that grow out of prior research and theory about relationships, family systems, education, and child and youth development. This study and future research will test whether the framework, as conceptualized, meets these principles, while also yielding insight for ongoing refinement.

These principles include the following:

- **Actionable.** The framework emphasizes everyday strategies, actions, and behaviors that people can choose to do—and be encouraged to do.
- **Not one size fits all.** The framework allows for many ways to cultivate a developmental relationship. The strategies and actions can be enacted or embodied in a variety of ways, depending on the age, temperament, culture, strengths, and interests of the people involved.
- **Applicable across diverse communities.** We seek to develop a framework that is relevant for many different groups of people in society, while also recognizing the uniqueness of particular groups. This includes
  - ► diverse groups of children and adults (gender, age, sexual orientation, abilities, and others);
  - ► diverse types of relationships, including parenting adults, peers, mentors, teachers, and youth workers;
  - ► diverse cultures, ideologies, and socioeconomic levels; and
  - ► diverse contexts, including families, schools, organizations, and communities.

  Other relational actions uniquely valued by specific groups might be included in a framework of developmental relationships. Identifying those unique strengths would itself be an important task. However, our current efforts focus on factors that resonate broadly across differences. In doing so, we seek to create a shared vision for collective action in a pluralistic society.
- **Experienced across relationships and contexts.** The framework reflects that each young person needs a balance of these essential actions over time and across settings or contexts, including family, schools, programs, and communities.

Every relationship cannot embody all of these features all of the time.

- **Bidirectional.** The framework reflects that developmental relationships involve a two-way, interactive influence between the people in the relationship, such that the young person also has an effect on the adult's development and vice versa.
- **Deepening over time.** The framework allows for relationships becoming more complex, interactive, deeper, and more nuanced over time. As young people develop, the balance of power in their relationships with adults shifts, with decision making and responsibility gradually evolving from being centered primarily on the adult to more shared responsibility and, in many instances, to the young person (Li & Julian, 2012).
- **Strength based.** The framework emphasizes that each person has strengths and capacities to offer others (and themselves) through their relationships. From this perspective, we view each person in the relationship as a resource to be developed rather than a problem to be fixed.
- **Rooted in good science.** We selected actions in the framework that are grounded in existing empirical research, including evidence that these actions are associated with key developmental outcomes. Over time, we will add to this evidence.
- **Necessary but not sufficient.** A focus on developmental relationships as described in the framework does not diminish the need to simultaneously address systemic and structural barriers that discriminate and create inequities, leaving some children, youth, and families on the margins because of their race, ethnicity, social class, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disabilities, or other aspects of their identity. An important challenge is to form constructive relationships across these boundaries in ways that reduce isolation and increase mutual care and advocacy.

Getting relationships right

Concluding that relationships matter is not, in itself, enough. Virtually everyone will affirm that relationships matter; they may even be taken for granted or assumed. Yet, because relationships seem so amorphous (and, yes, touchy feely), most schools, programs, organizations, and coalitions have not invested time or energy in understanding, measuring, or strengthening the relationships that matter most.

This critique is not to discount the considerable attention that has been given to studying and trying to build better environments for young people, such as in promoting "positive school climate." It is simply to say that such efforts do not go far enough in articulating a broader understanding of relationships that contribute to young people's well-being.

If relationships are, in fact, the "active ingredient" in successful interventions (Li & Julian, 2012), they are neither fluff nor a distraction from what really matters. We cannot leave relationship quality to chance. We need to become more intentional in forming, strengthening, and sustaining the web of transformative relationships in the lives of children and youth.

An analogy to leadership development can be useful. Conventional wisdom once held that leaders were born and not made, and that the capacity to lead was important, but intangible. Since that time, however, researchers have shown that the quality and character of an organization's leaders cannot only be assessed, but can also be improved (e.g., Hallinger, 2011; Yukl, 2012). As a result, it is now standard practice for corporations and other organizations to invest significant time and resources in the "soft stuff" of leadership development.

Over time, cultivating relationships in the lives of children, youth, and families needs to be approached in the same way that corporations and other organizations approach developing leaders: as an endeavor that is fluid and complex, yet indispensable to achieving objectives. This report introduces Search Institute's newest research focused on critical relationships in young people's lives.

Developmental Relationships in Families: A Snapshot

3

Across a diverse sample of 1,085 U.S. families, we see a great deal of strength in developmental relationships. We also see opportunities for growth in Share Power and Expand Possibility.

Search earch Institute's exploration of developmental relationships begins in families, the foundational relationship context for children and youth. After describing how the study was conducted and the sample, this report presents the results of a nationwide survey of 1,085 parenting adults with children ages 3 to 13.[3] It shows the strengths and challenges they experience in their relationships with their children, and examines the extent to which various demographic factors influence developmental relationships in these families.

Data from this large and diverse sample of parenting adults shows considerable strength in developmental relationships across diverse families, cultures, and circumstances. It also highlights gaps in developmental relationships, particularly within the essential actions Share Power and Expand Possibility. Although demographic factors generally account for relatively few differences in levels of developmental relationships reported, one demographic factor that appears to influence families' experience of developmental relationships is the experience of financial strain.

3 We use the term "parenting adult" to refer to any adult who takes primary or shared responsibility for raising a child, regardless of biological relationship.

TAKEAWAYS

- At least seven out of ten parenting adults indicated that their relationship with their child is characterized by these essential actions: Express Care, Provide Support, and Challenge Growth.
- Two essential actions were less common: Share Power and Expand Possibility.
- Parents were about equally as likely to report developmental relationships across differences of race or Hispanic ethnicity, education, household income, immigrant status, sexual orientation, and community size (urbanicity).
- There were some notable differences by the age of the child, the parent's relationship with the child, and the child's gender (with parents reporting stronger developmental relationships with girls than boys).
- Families who have trouble making ends meet have a harder time in developmental relationships than other families.

How we conducted this study

This report is based on an in-depth, online survey of parenting adults.[4] It builds on a review of existing research on developmental and family relationships as well as

a series of focus groups conducted across the United States with parenting adults, youth, educators, and youth workers. These discussions explored their perspectives on the elements of relationships that make a difference in young people's lives.

Subsequently, we developed a survey to assess each of the following from a parenting adult's perspective:

- each of the five essential actions for forming developmental relationships and the action steps that manifest each essential action;
- a subset of other family variables that could affect experiences of developmental relationships (for example, family demographics and levels of family stress); and
- Selected measures of well-being that could affect and be affected by developmental relationships (for example, perceived child behaviors and character strengths).

This cross-sectional survey tests the quality of the measures as well as the relationships between measures. We cannot establish cause-and-effect relationships, which require longitudinal research that tracks the same people over time.

Survey participants were recruited primarily through an online platform, with an additional small number of parenting adults who were recruited from a community-based sample in the southeastern United States in order to increase the diversity of the sample. For more information on the study methodology and sample, see the Technical Appendix.

About the sample

In total, 1,085 U.S. parenting adults with children ages 3 to 13 completed the online survey during the summer and fall of 2014.[5] The demographics of this sample are shown in Display 8. Key characteristics include the following:

- **Race or Hispanic ethnicity.** Almost one-third of the sample (31%) are people of color (including 4% of whites who self-identify as ethnically Hispanic). This sample slightly underrepresents African American and Hispanic Americans when compared to the U.S. Census. In 2010, 14% of families with children under age 18 in the Census were Black, compared to 12% in our sample who indicated they were Black, African American, or African. In the U.S. Census, 14% of families with children under age 18 selected Hispanic as their ethnicity, compared to 11% in this study (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). That said, our data provide adequate subsample sizes for racial-ethnic comparisons of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. However, lower participation rates among parenting adults indicating Asian/Pacific Islander, or Native American/Alaska Native heritage limited our ability to compare these subgroups.[6]
- **Gender.** The sample is disproportionately composed of female parents (64%). This partly reflects the realities of more female-headed single-parent households, but it also reflects the reality that mothers are more likely to participate in surveys about family life than fathers (though fathers are increasingly engaged in parenting responsibilities; see Parker & Wang, 2013). Analyses revealed few differences by the respondent's gender. (They are noted when found.)
- **Income and work.** Almost one-third (38%) of the sample reported an annual household income of less than $35,000. About half the sample (48%) indicated they work full time outside the home.
- **Marital status.** Most (62%) parenting adults indicated they are married or in a civil union. Another 13% are living with a partner. The remaining participants have either never married (13%) or are divorced, separated, or widowed (12%).
- **Parenting adult's education.** One quarter (27%) of parenting adults in this sample have a high school degree or less, and 45% have a bachelor's degree or higher.
- **Sexual orientation.** About 8% of the sample self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other, and 92% indicated that they are heterosexual.

4 For additional detail about the formative research conducted prior to the development of this survey, see the Technical Appendix.

5 For more information on how the sample was recruited and data were cleaned, see the Technical Appendix.

6 Calculations are by Search Institute, based on data in Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013.

Display 8

Characteristics of the parenting adults and families in the study

The total sample for the study was **1,085 parenting adults.** Below are the characteristics of this sample. (Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding. In some cases, multiple options could be selected.)

	%
Age	
18 – 25	**9**
26 – 30	**23**
31 – 35	**29**
36 – 40	**19**
41 and older	**20**
Gender or Gender Identity	
Female	**64**
Male	**35**
Transgender or not sure	**<1**
Race	
African, African American, or Black	**12**
Asian or Pacific Islander	**5**
Mixed race	**8**
Other	**2**
White	**73**
Ethnicity	
Hispanic	**11**
Non-Hispanic	**89**
Marital Status	
Married or in a civil union	**62**
Living with a partner	**13**
Never married	**13**
Divorced, separated, or widowed	**12**
Educational Attainment	
High school, GED, or less	**27**
Vocational, technical, or associate's degree	**28**
Bachelor's degree	**33**
Graduate or professional degree	**12**
Employment Status	
Working outside the home (full time)	**48**
Working outside the home (part time)	**11**
Self-employed	**16**
Homemaker	**19**
Not working, looking, or retired	**6**

	%
Primary Language(s) Spoken at Home	
English	**99**
Spanish	**4**
Other	**2**
Immigration Status	
Born in the United States	**95**
Not born in the United States	**5**
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	**92**
Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other	**8**
Household Income	
Less than $35,000	**38**
$35,000 to $49,999	**18**
$50,000 to 74,999	**22**
$75,000 to $99,999	**12**
$100,000 or more	**10**
Type of Community	
Rural area or small town	**13**
Town	**18**
Small city	**21**
Medium-sized city	**25**
Large city	**23**
Number of Children Parenting (age ≤12)	
1 child	**41**
2 children	**39**
3 or more children	**20**
Relationship to Focus Child	
Birth or adoptive parent	**86**
Stepparent	**5**
Other family member or other	**9**
Time Living with Focus Child	
All the time	**80**
75 to 99% of the time	**7**
50 to 74% of the time	**5**
25 to 49% of the time	**4**
Less than 25% of the time	**4**

Note: Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding. In some cases, multiple options could be selected.

- **Children.** Most parenting adults in this study have one or two children (80%). Each picked one child between ages 3 and 13 to focus on for the survey. These children were relatively equally spread across the study's target age range. When asked about their relationship with this focus child, 86% of parenting adults indicated this was their birth or adopted child. In addition, 80% of the survey participants live with the focus child all the time.

The focus child in the study

Parenting adults in the study focused their responses on their relationship with a child in the age range of 3 to 13 (M = 8.2 years of age; Display 9). This age range encompasses a number of key developmental transitions in childhood (from preschool to elementary school to middle school), yet the nature of the parent-child relationship maintains a number of key features, allowing for using a consistent survey for all participants.

The parent-child relationship with younger children (infants and toddlers) likely reflects many of the same relationship qualities identified in the survey, but they would be expressed in very different ways, since young children are much more dependent and less able to verbalize. The upper age group begins the shift into adolescence, which introduces additional dynamics—and a broader range of relationships beyond the immediate family—into the parent-child relationship.

The value and limits of parents' perspectives

This study relied on the perspectives of parenting adults in discussing both their relationship with their child and their perception of their child's developmental strengths and well-being. We recognize the limitations of parent self-reports on parenting practices and child development (Collins et al., 2000). Parenting adults may be prone to overstate the quality of their relationship, and they do not have (and should not have) an unbiased perspective on their child.

However, parenting adults do have an important perspective on their relationship and their child. We need to understand these relationships from parents' perspectives—even with the inevitable limitations—since those perceptions play a significant role in shaping parents attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, asking parents about their children's development is an efficient, if imperfect, way to gain broad perspectives on development of children who are too young to complete written surveys.

Future research will complement this study with other approaches, both qualitative and quantitative. For example, a study underway examines parent-adolescent relationships by linking parent and youth responses (since middle and high school youth can complete surveys). We expect that each future study will enrich, challenge, or reinforce the findings from our initial exploration of developmental relationships.[7]

The value of the sample

This study's sample, although not random, is large and diverse, including adequate representations of diverse populations to enable examination of dynamics within subgroups.[8] Although we must be cautious about generalizations to the whole population of the United States, this study is the largest and most diverse examination yet of *developmental relationships* in the family. As such, it offers an important first look at how parenting adults view their relationships with their children through the critical years from early childhood into early adolescence.

Developmental relationships in families: Strengths and challenges

The core of the survey consisted of questions that assessed parent-child relationships from the perspectives of parenting adults. Each of the 20 action steps within the framework of developmental relationships was measured with three or more survey questions. The results summarized in Display 10 offer an overall sense of the percent of families achieving optimal levels of the developmental relationship essential actions and action steps.[9]

7 Visit www.search-institute.org for updates on these and other studies on developmental relationships as they are completed.

8 See the Technical Appendix for a discussion of study limitations.

9 The target used in these analyses is an average score on the possible response values of 75% or higher (e.g., 4.0 or higher on a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 to 5). For more information, see note on Display 10.

Display 9

Characteristics of the focus child for parenting adult responses

Parenting adults were asked to identify a specific child to focus on as they responded to the survey. This child's name or a nickname, when volunteered by the parent, was integrated into survey questions throughout the survey as a reminder. Here are the characteristics of the children based on their parenting adult's report.

	%
Age	
3 – 6	**32**
7 – 10	**42**
11 – 13	**26**
Gender	
Female	**47**
Male	**53**
School Grade Level (2014-15)	
Prekindergarten	**7**
Kindergarten	**13**
Grade 1	**11**
Grade 2	**10**
Grade 3	**12**
Grade 4	**10**
Grade 5	**12**
Grade 6	**10**
Grade 7	**10**
Not enrolled in school	**5**

	%
Immigration Status	
Born in the United States	**98**
Not born in the United States	**2**
Special Needs	
Has a learning disability	**9**
Has a physical disability	**3**
Has a mental health issue	**7**
Has a chronic disease or medical condition	**5**

Note: For additional detail on the methods used to help participants focus on their relationship with a specific child, see the Technical Appendix.

Essential actions with strength: Care, support, and challenge

In contrast to some messages in the broader culture, parenting adults report a lot of strengths in their relationships with their kids. Particularly strong were areas of expressing care, providing support, and challenging growth. That is not to say these actions are easy, but they are areas parents are intentional about in their relationships. Parenting adults surveyed reported moderate to high levels of three core actions in the developmental relationships framework: Express Care (83% achieving an optimal level), Provide Support (75%), and Challenge Growth (72%).

These three foundational strengths reflect the rich literature on authoritative parenting that balances high expectations with a relationship defined by respect, open communication, and warmth (see Baumrind, 1968; Steinberg, 2001). Thus, the strengths parenting adults report in these areas offer considerable potential for setting and keeping children and youth on a positive path.

Essential actions with gaps: Share Power and Expand Possibility

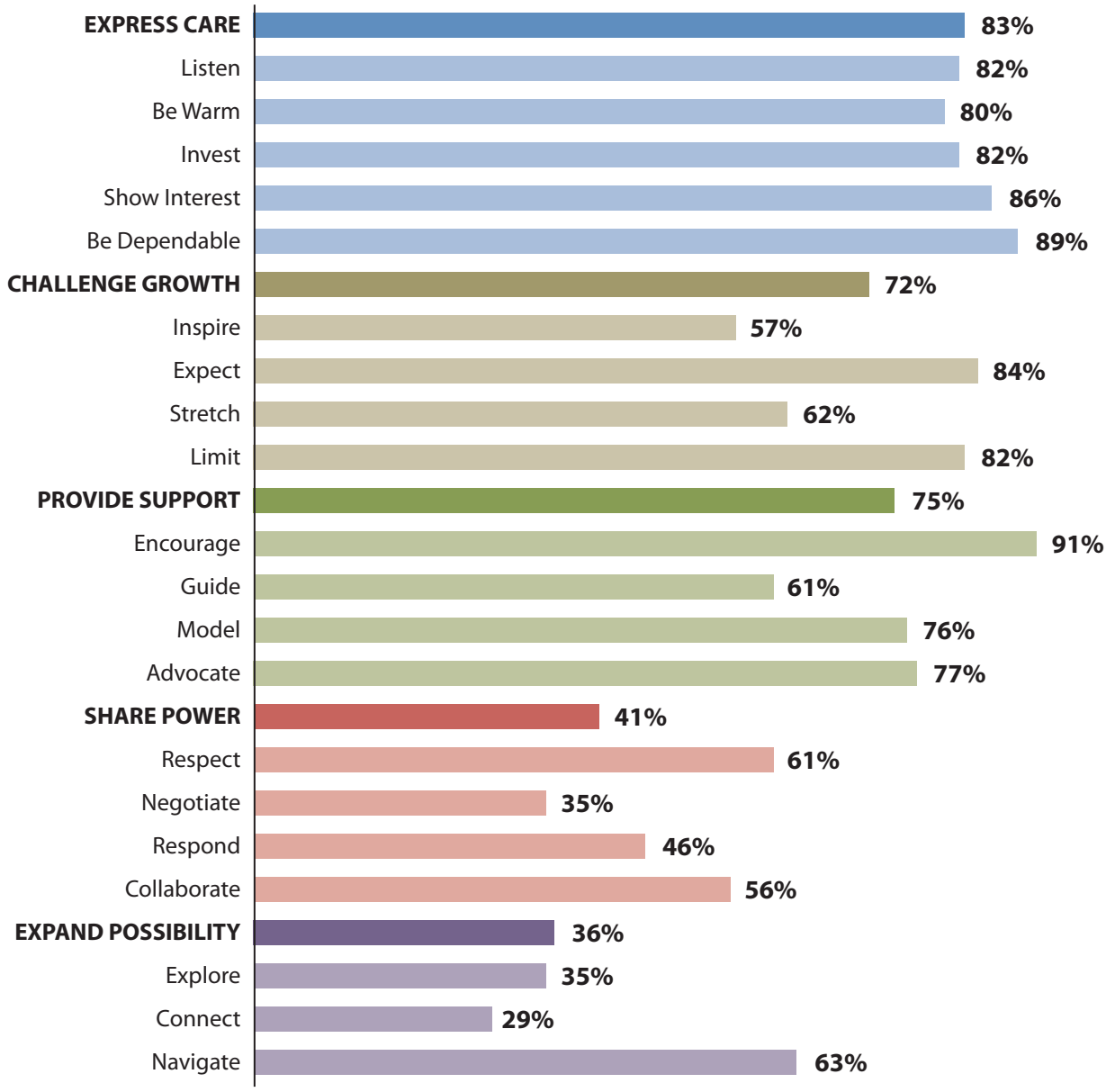
We see greater gaps between desirable and reported parent-child relationships in the action steps that promote sharing power and expanding possibility. Particular action steps that are less common include: Respond (a Share Power action step; 46%), Explore (an Expand Possibility action step; 35%), Negotiate (a Share Power action step; 35%), and Connect (an Expand Possibility action step; 29%).

Thus, by and large, parenting adults are giving their kids the basics of care, support, and challenge. The two

Display 10

A snapshot of developmental relationships in families

Percentages of parenting adults whose responses to survey questions yielded a score of 75% or higher (considered an optimal level) for the essential actions (darker bars) and action steps (lighter bars) in the developmental relationships framework.



Note: Parenting adults were asked to report on the frequency of several specific behaviors related to each of the developmental relationship action steps. Each of these items was scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale with higher scores indicating greater endorsement or use. The items for each essential action (and, subsequently, the action steps for each essential action) were averaged. The percentages reflect the percentage of parenting adults who met or exceeded the optimal target for each scale. The target used in these analyses is quantified as an average score equal to or greater than 75% of possible response values on a given construct. Thus, a score of 75% equates to an average score of 4.0; i.e., generally endorsing or strongly endorsing all of the items used to assess a particular essential action or action step. Note that the lowest score a participant could score was a 1, the highest a 5. Thus, there are four points of variability, making the proper cutoff for 75% of the possible score a 4.0.

elements that are less common are sharing power and expanding possibility. That's important since, as we'll see in the following sections, these two essential actions explain more of the difference among youth outcomes than the other three essential actions do.

The contrast with societal perceptions

These findings highlight considerable strength in families. As we have noted, that conclusion stands in contrast to widespread assumptions that families and parenting adults are fragile, ineffective, or dysfunctional. How might we reconcile this dissonance? Some positive bias is, of course, likely in parenting adults' self-reported behavior. Based on previous research (Benson, Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Leffert, 2011; Syvertsen, Roehlkepartain, & Scales, 2012), we would also anticipate that children and teens may perceive some elements of the parent-child relationship differently.

That said, we hypothesize that a more significant issue is that society tends to focus its attention on the problems, often not recognizing the strengths that may also exist in contemporary family life. Articulating and tapping the strengths that may be present, but unrecognized or hidden, offers a gateway to empowerment for families. The vast majority of research has found that most families function well and parents are engaged in their children's lives—even as they also face important challenges (Bengston, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Roehlkepartain et al., 2002; Roehlkepartain et al., 2004; Steinberg, 2001; Walsh, 2003). So while some positive bias is likely, any disconnects between these findings and general expectations also challenge us to re-examine our biases regarding the state of families to recognize the strength and resilience present, even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

The most and least common action steps

Display 11 uses the same data shown in Display 10, but organizes it based on the prevalence of the individual action steps in the Developmental Relationships Framework (rather than organizing by the five broader strategies). We see that at least half of the parenting adults met the optimal target on 16 of the 20 action steps. The most widespread action steps were generally in the Express Care strategy and the least common action steps were Share Power and Expand Possibilities actions.

Encourage. If we probe a bit more deeply into each action step, we see the specific behaviors that parenting adults said they do (with each behavior represented by a single survey item). When we look at Encourage (the most common action step), we see that 93% of parenting adults reported engaging in each of these behaviors often or very often:

- Praising their child for hard work, whether their child succeeds or fails.
- Showing excitement when their child tries to learn new skills.
- Encouraging their child to try things they might be interested in.

Connect. The least common action step was Connect, which focuses on the ways parenting adults introduce their child to other trustworthy adults who can also help them grow by forming developmental relationships.

Although only 29% of parenting adults reported engaging in *all* the behaviors to connect their child with other nonparental adults often or very often, an examination of the individual behaviors suggests a greater percentage of parenting adults take singular, specific actions that are part of our measure of Connect. Here are the percentages of parenting adults who often or very often connect their child to other non-parental adults who

- have a similar hobby or interest **40%**
- expose them to different career paths **42%**
- teach them about ideas or cultures that are different from their own **44%**
- develop their unique talents or skills **64%**

Patterns of developmental relationships across different groups

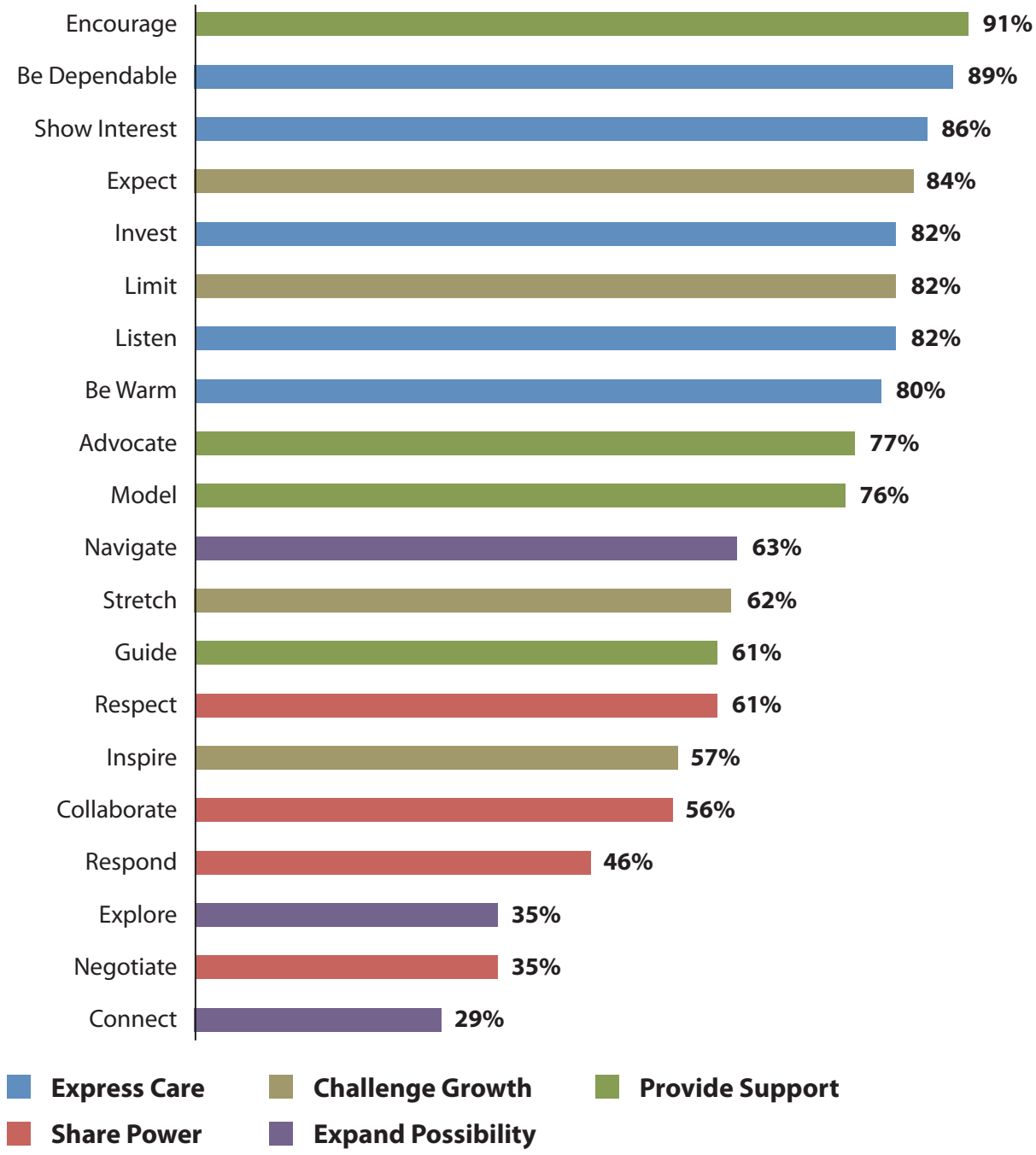
A series of analyses was run to test for differences in the five essential actions for forming developmental relationships across different subgroups within the sample.[10] **Few or no statistically significant differences**

10 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

Display 11

Most and least common actions in the developmental relationships framework

Percentages of parenting adults whose responses to survey questions met or surpassed the optimal score for the 20 specific action steps in the developmental relationships framework



Note. For scoring, see note on Display 10.

were found by the following parent variables: age, education, household income, immigration status, sexual orientation, or type of community the family lives in.

However, notable differences were present on a select subset of characteristics, shown in Display 12. (For ease of understanding, the display shows percentages of families who met or surpassed the established optimal level for each essential action. The following text focuses on differences in means, which is more precise for identifying differences.)

- **Race.** There were no significant racial differences in Express Care or Share Power. For the Provide Support, Challenge Growth, and Expand Possibility, the racial subgroups that scored the highest were parenting adults who self-identified as African, African American, or Black *or* Other. Parenting adults who self-identified as Asian or Pacific Islander consistently had the lowest means.
- **Ethnicity.** Hispanic parents reported significantly higher levels of Share Power and Expand Possibility than non-Hispanic parents.
- **Gender.** Parenting adults reported higher levels of all five essential actions in their relationships with their daughters, as compared to parenting adults who reported on their sons. All of these differences were significant except for Challenge Growth and Expand Possibility. Female parenting adults reported significantly higher levels of all five developmental relationship essential actions than male parents.
- **Child's age.** Parenting adults of children ages 7 to 10 reported higher levels of Express Care than parents of children ages 11 to 13 (with parents of children ages 3 to 6 reporting values between these two groups). The absolute level of Express Care was high for all three age groups. However the relative drop in Express Care in relationships between parenting adults and young adolescents corresponds with the increased orientation away from parents (and toward other adults and peers) that can be common in this developmental period.[11]
- **Relationship to child.** Stepparents reported significantly lower levels of all five essential actions in their relationships with their children than other parenting adults (including biological and adoptive parents, other family members, and legal guardians). All of these differences were significant except Challenge Growth.

These findings are most significant in highlighting the *similarities* across different subgroups of families within the United States. Many stereotypes about families are not reflected in these data; we see strengths and challenges across all types of families. From a practical and policy perspective, this is good news, since these demographic status measures are either core to a family's identity or they reflect characteristics or circumstances that are difficult to change.

The differences we see also merit ongoing dialogue around how fathers and father figures build developmental relationships with their children and how we form and support the formation of new relationships in blended families.

In addition, the finding regarding stepfamilies is consistent with prior research on the challenges facing stepfamilies. However, as with all studies of averages, there are a wide range of experiences within stepfamilies, including many in which children form close, warm relationships with stepparents (e.g., King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014).

Finally, the differences in relationships by the age of the child reflect, to some extent, developmental processes. But they also point to the need for increased supports for families as they negotiate the transition into adolescence.

Financial strain undermines developmental relationships

Although we found no consistent differences in developmental relationships by household income, we did find important differences based on how financially strained parenting adults feel. The strain that comes with "sometimes not buying the things we need" (high financial

11 Although increased conflict is common among young adolescents and their parents, it's not necessarily typical of all kids and families, with only 5 to 15% of teenagers having serious conflicts with their parents (Eisenberg et al., 2008). Most young adolescents and their parents have minimal conflict, and their orientation to parents versus others depends on the issue at hand, with parents retaining significant influence over the most important life values young people develop (Scales, 2010).

strain) or having "just enough money to meet our needs" (some financial strain) can undermine family relationships.

Families experiencing financial strain exhibited lower levels of four of the five essential actions of a developmental relationship (Display 13). (As noted earlier, for ease of understanding, the display shows percentages of families who met or surpassed the established optimal level for each essential action. The text focuses on differences in means for comparison and interpretation, which is more precise for identifying differences. See Technical Appendix.)

Notably, there were **no differences in Express Care.** Even when families are facing significant hardship, they are just as likely as other families to express care to each other.

These findings remind us that the broader social context influences, for good or bad, family relationships. It is not impossible for families under financial strain to have developmental relationships (many do, and their levels are not dramatically different from other families), but it is clearly harder.

Display 12

Parenting adults reporting each essential action, by demographics

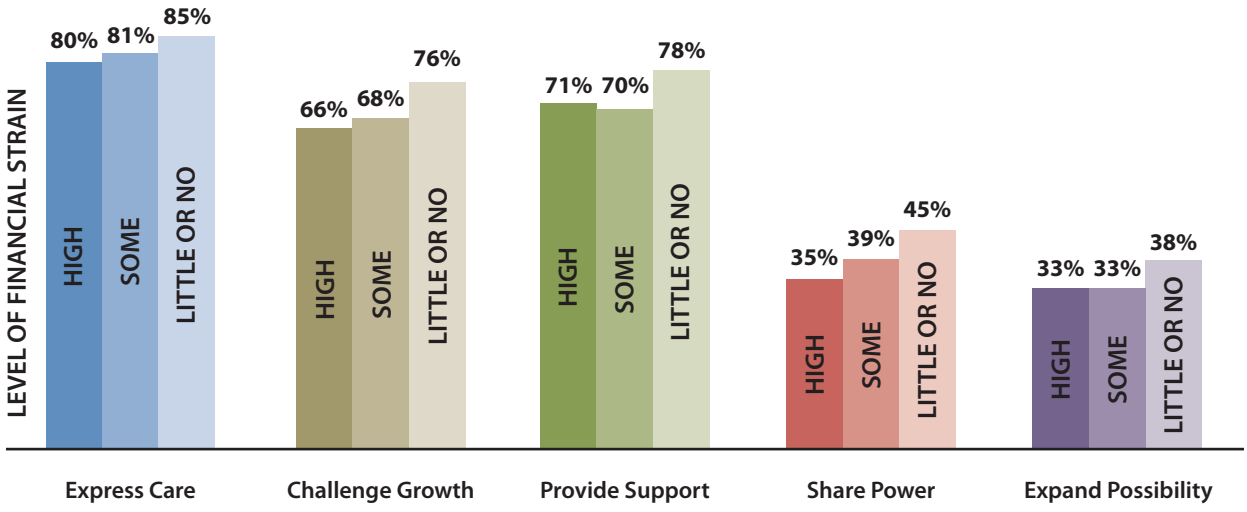
	Essential Actions in Developmental Relationships				
	Express Care %	Challenge Growth %	Provide Support %	Share Power %	Expand Possibility %
Parent Race					
Black	82	77	75	46	40
White	84	70	74	40	34
Other	80	74	74	45	41
Parent Ethnicity					
Hispanic	83	75	78	48	43
Non-Hispanic	83	71	74	41	35
Parent Gender					
Male	71	65	64	33	29
Female	90	76	80	45	40
Child Gender					
Male	80	70	74	39	35
Female	86	74	76	44	37
Age of Child					
3 to 6	83	74	77	41	37
7 to 10	85	70	75	45	34
11 to 13	79	72	71	37	39
Relationship to Child					
Birth or adoptive parent	85	73	76	42	36
Stepparent	48	66	59	22	22
Other family member or other	81	70	74	48	42

Note: For scoring, see note on Display 10. For additional details, see the Technical Appendix.

Display 13

Developmental relationships by level of family financial strain

Percentages of parenting adults who reported optimal levels of each developmental relationship essential action by levels of financial strain in the family.



Notes: Financial strain labels are aligned with the following response options: High financial strain: We can't buy the things we need sometimes. Some financial strain: We have just enough money for the things we need. Little or no financial strain: We have no problem buying the things needed, and we can also sometimes buy special things, or, we have enough money to buy almost anything we want.

For scoring on the essential actions in developmental relationships, see note on Display 10. See the Technical Appendix for additional details.

Educational concerns and developmental relationships

A pattern similar to that of financial strain was found for other stresses on families, with lower levels of developmental relationships being associated with more stress. For example, parenting adults (with children ages 3 to 13) who reported being concerned about whether their child will drop out before completing high school were less likely than those who were not so concerned to report reaching the target levels for the five essential actions in a developmental relationship (Display 14; also see Technical Appendix).

Levels of all the essential actions are highest for those parenting adults who have no concern about their child's long-term school success. Yet, it is noteworthy that the trend is not linear for each of the developmental relationship essential actions; i.e., increase in academic concern is not associated with a decrease in taking the essential actions at each level. For example, parenting adults who were somewhat, quite, or extremely concerned about their child dropping out before graduating high school scored *higher* on Challenge Growth and Expand Possibility than those who were a little concerned. This pattern could reflect that these parenting adults were actively working on these issues with their child, whereas those who were only a little concerned may not be as intentional in working to challenge their child to grow, actively negotiating and working with the child, or expanding the child's connections and horizons. An important question for future research is whether this greater engagement for those who are most concerned has long-term benefits for the children's learning.

Tapping strengths in diverse families

As we noted in the introduction, one underlying attitudinal challenge in engaging families is the notion of the hard-to-reach parent. Too often (particularly in regard to low-income communities and communities of color) parents and families are not viewed as resources for education and development, but are instead sometimes seen as impediments to growth and learning.

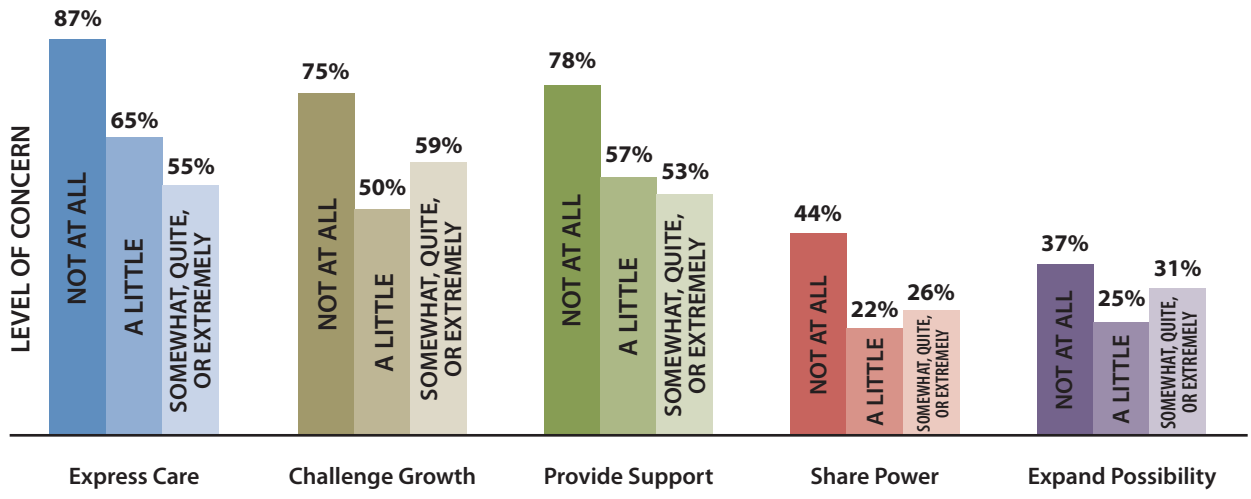
Of course some families are dysfunctional and unsafe for children and other family members. But this study—along with many others—asserts that those patterns are more the exception than the rule. Families exhibit a lot of strengths in their relationships. Those strengths may or may not include showing up, participating, or being "involved" parents.

Consistent with our previous national study of family strengths (Syvertsen, Roehlkepartain, & Scales, 2012), this study found many strengths in developmental relationships across the diversity and complexity of today's families. These are strengths that need to be celebrated, reinforced, and tapped—not only for the children and youth who live in those families but also for society as a whole as we work together to nurture key character strengths and promote well-being for all children and youth.

Display 14

Developmental relationships by level of concern about school success

Percentages of parenting adults who reported high levels of each developmental relationship strategy by the level of concern the parent has about whether the child (currently between ages 3 and 13) will graduate from high school.



See Technical Appendix for details.

The Power of Developmental Relationships in Families

4

Developmental relationships are associated with children developing important character strengths and in attaining a range of positive outcomes. Share Power has the strongest links to positive development.

TAKEAWAYS

- When parenting adults report that they have stronger relationships with their children, they are also more likely to report that their children are doing well, including being motivated to learn, taking personal responsibility, and experiencing other key character strengths.
- Developmental relationships in families are much stronger predictors of character strengths than demographics.
- Sharing power is most consistently and strongly associated with character strengths, with additional contributions most common from challenging growth and expanding possibilities.
- When families experience financial strain, their children are much more likely to be doing well when their relationships are stronger. Sharing power and challenging growth appear to cultivate resilience in financially strained families.

What do we as a society want for our young people? To what do they and their families aspire? How might we align efforts with these aspirations in ways that will not only support young people to become valued, contributing, and productive members of society, but also engage them and their families in shared goals?

As these questions imply, policymakers, educators, youth leaders, parents, and concerned citizens all are looking for new ways to frame shared goals and aspirations for children and youth. In the wake of more than a decade in which American schools focused almost exclusively on knowledge that can be measured on standardized achievement tests (which Paul Tough called "the cognitive hypothesis"), there is growing recognition of the need for broader ways of understanding what matters in young people's learning and development. Tough (2012) wrote:

> [A] disparate congregation of economists, educators, psychologists, and neuroscientists has begun to produce evidence that calls into question many of the assumptions behind the cognitive hypothesis. What matters most in a child's development, they say, is not how much information we can stuff into her brain in the first few years. What matters, instead, is whether we are able to help her develop a very different set of qualities. (p. xv)

Numerous efforts are underway to emphasize those qualities, which are often referred to as social-emotional skills, noncognitive skills, or 21st-century skills. In this report, we use the term *character strengths* to refer to this constellation of psychological and social competencies. The nation's growing interest in developing young people's character strengths is particularly evident in as the education system moves beyond the system put in place by the federal No Child Left Behind legislation, which defined educational success based solely on standardized test scores. It is also evident in out-of-school or extended learning programs that articulate their unique contribution to young people's lives.

Adding parenting adults' perspectives

Most of these discussions about enhancing young people's character strengths are occurring among policy makers, researchers, employers, and practitioners. Rarely are parenting adults (or young people) part of the conversation.

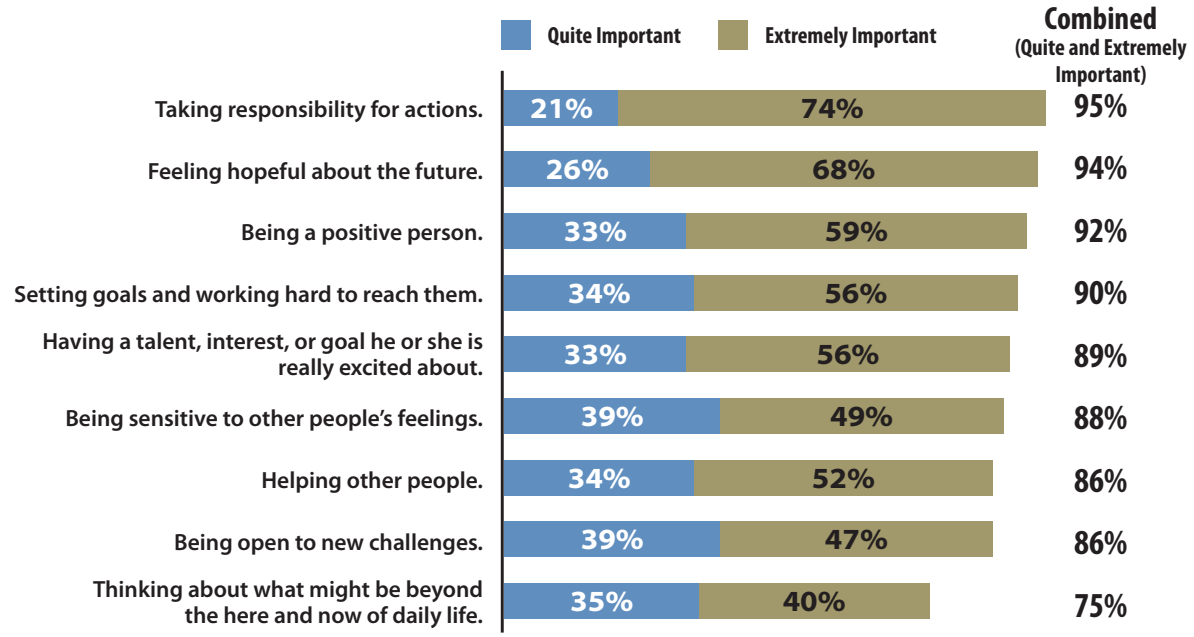
In our survey of parenting adults with children ages 3 to 13, we asked them to prioritize their goals and aspirations for their children. The priorities we asked about were identified through Search Institute's prior work on thriving in childhood and adolescence. (See Benson, 2006, 2008; Benson & Scales, 2009; Scales & Benson, 2005.) As shown in Display 15, at least three out of four parenting adults in our survey indicated that all of the nine priorities for children's development that we asked the to evaluate were quite or extremely important, with personal responsibility, a sense of hope, and being a positive person garnering the strongest responses.

These findings echo the conclusions of a Pew Research Center study (Parker, 2014), which also asked parents about their priorities for their kids. Topping the list of what is important to parents in the Pew poll were: being responsible, working hard, helping others, being well-mannered, being independence, expressing creativity, showing empathy, and being persistent—with at least two-thirds of parents endorsing each of these as important.

Display 15

The value parenting adults place on children's character strengths

Percentages of parenting adults who said each character strength is quite or extremely important to them.



The results of both surveys point to the importance for parents of their children developing character strengths tied to discovering who they are and who they are becoming, their power to make choices and shape their own development, and how they matter in their families, communities, and world.

The outcomes of developmental relationships

This study hypothesizes that building developmental relationships contributes to the development of several character strengths and behaviors, which, in time, lead to more tangible evidence of successful development, such as being prepared for school, work, and life.

This chapter examines correlations between developmental relationships and measures of child character strengths from the perspective of parenting adults.[12] We have utilized a number of measures (as reported by parenting adults) that echo priorities for both parents and society.

In general, we see strong correlations between developmental relationships and multiple measures of children's character strengths and well-being. A series of analyses examined the relationships between developmental relationships and the following (each of which is described in more detail later in this chapter):

- **Character strengths composite:** An overall measure of whether parenting adults believe their child is on track with several strengths, including concern for others, a sense of purpose, a goal orientation, and openness to challenges. (See Technical Appendix for these items.)
- **Motivation to learn:** A brief assessment of young people's motivation to read and learn, work hard, and master new skills.
- **Social-emotional well-being:** Measures of a child taking responsibility for her or his own actions, being emotionally aware and managing feelings effectively, and being able to concentrate.
- **Risk behaviors:** Measures of conduct problems (such as fighting or being defiant) and being impulsive (including interrupting, acting without thinking, and having trouble sitting still).

This chapter examines these potential outcomes of developmental relationships. Additional detail about the psychometric properties of each of the correlational outcomes can be found in Technical Appendix.

Overall patterns

In stepwise regression analyses of the association between developmental relationships and these different measures of children's well-being (Display 17), developmental relationships accounted for

- 42% of the variance in the composite measure character strengths (illustrated in Display 16)[13];
- 34% of the variance in young people's motivation to learn;
- Between 28% and 37% of the variance in children's social-emotional well-being; and
- 12% (impulsivity) and 17% (conduct problems) of the variance in the risk behaviors.

Demographic differences matter little

Demographic differences generally contributed less than 5% of the variance in all of these aspects of well-being. That suggests these demographic factors (age, gender, race or Hispanic ethnicity, immigration status, and financial strain), by themselves, do not determine these developmental outcomes for children and youth. Developmental relationships consistently predict much more of the variance in children's well-being than all demographic markers combined.

Among the demographic factors, only a child's gender is consistently significant in predicting these developmental outcomes. Compared to parents who completed the survey about their sons, parents who

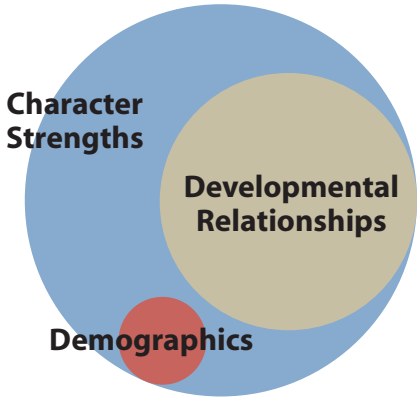
12 Although we cannot establish a cause-and-effect relationship within this cross-sectional study, we can examine the strength of statistical associations between parent-reported experiences of relationships and measures of well-being in the survey.

13 Explaining 42% of a well-being indicator or outcome with these kinds of social or psychological variables is quite meaningful in the social sciences, where correlations above .30 ("explaining" just 9% of an outcome) are uncommon and where it is common for only 10%-20% of complex outcomes to be explained. (See discussion in Benson et al., 2006; Scales et al., 2006.)

Display 16

Predicting young people's character strengths

Developmental relationships in families play a powerful role in children's development. Based on analyses of the association between overall developmental relationships and a broad measure of character strengths, developmental relationships in families contribute 42% of the difference in parents' reports of key character strengths in their children. Demographics such as income, race, or Hispanic ethnicity, and family composition contribute 4% of the variance in overall character strengths.



Note: Based on stepwise regression analysis.

completed the survey about their daughters reported higher levels of all positive outcomes and lower levels of the risk behavior outcomes.

The importance of three essential actions

When we look more deeply at the association between the five essential actions of a developmental relationship and composite character strengths, four of the actions emerge as positive predictors.[14] These are (in order of strength)

- Share Power,
- Challenge Growth,
- Expand Possibility, and
- Express Care

14 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

By itself, the other essential action (Provide Support) within families did not meaningfully contribute to character strengths. That does not mean that providing support is not important overall. It is almost certainly foundational for a strong relationship. However, the results do suggest that, if the goal is children acquiring a broad foundation of character strengths and positive behaviors, then simply providing support in families will not be enough. The most powerful leverage point likely is Share Power, which is most associated with the broadest range of character strengths and behaviors in this study. In addition, Challenge Growth, Expand Possibility, and Express Care have particular potential to make a difference.

Linking developmental relationships with CHARACTER STRENGTHS

In addition to measuring whether children are developing overall character strengths (from parents' perspectives based on a composite measure), the survey allowed us to test whether children's experiences of developmental relationships are associated with several specific social-emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal qualities, including their motivation to learn, personal responsibility, emotional competence, prosocial behaviors (such as kindness to others), and effortful control. The relational strategies that statistically relate to these indicators of child well-being differ depending on the outcome.[14] Of the five essential actions for building a developmental relationship, Share Power and Challenge Growth are the most consistent, positive predictors across the indicators of character strengths that we examined.

Motivation to learn

Educational success is a critical part of growing for the vast majority of children and youth. Formal learning is essential for success in today's complex economy, including being able to continue education beyond high school. As Philip B. Levine of Wellesley College recently wrote, "The most direct way to improve labor market success for a [youth] is to improve her educational outcomes" (Levine, 2014, p. 2).

Thus, we examined parenting adults' assessments of whether their children (ages 3 to 13) are motivated to

Display 17

Associations between developmental relationships and children's character strengths and risk behaviors

	Character Strengths						Risk Behaviors	
	Character Strengths Composite	Motivation to Learn	Personal Responsibility	Emotional Competence	Prosocial Behavior	Effortful Control	Conduct Problems	Impulsivity
Express Care	↑	↑			↑		↓	
Listen								
Be Warm	↑	↑			↑		↓	
Invest								
Show Interest								
Be Dependable					↑		↓	
Challenge Growth	↑		↑	↑	↑			
Inspire				↑				
Expect	↑		↑	↑	↑			
Stretch								
Limit				↓				
Provide Support				↓				
Encourage				↓				
Guide				↑				
Model								
Advocate				↓				
Share Power	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓
Respect	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓
Negotiate	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓
Respond	↑	↑	↑			↑		
Collaborate	↑	↑			↓			
Expand Possibility	↑			↑			↑	↑
Explore							↑	↑
Connect	↑							
Navigate				↑				
Variance Explained by essential actions in Developmental Relationships (Adjusted R^2)	42%	34%	37%	32%	32%	28%	17%	12%

↑ = Significant positive predictor ($p < .05$); ↓ = Significant negative predictor ($p < .05$)

Note: Separate stepwise multiple regression models were run for each correlational outcome with subsequent post-hoc regressions to identify significant action-level predictors. Only statistically significant predictors ($p \leq .05$) are summarized above. The following demographic characteristics were entered as control variables in each model: Child Factors (age, gender) in Step 1; Parent Factors (gender, race, Hispanic ethnicity, immigration status, and financial strain) in Step 2; and, the five developmental relationship essential actions variables in Step 3. See Technical Appendix.

learn, which includes enjoying reading and learning, being eager to learn, trying to master new skills, and working up to their ability. Overall, 67% of parenting adults surveyed believed that their child is highly motivated to learn. Older children (age 11 – 13) and boys were described as having a lower motivation to learn than younger children and girls.

When we look at the role of developmental relationships in motivating children to learn, we see strong positive associations. Overall, the five essential actions in the developmental relationships framework explain 34% of the variance in levels of motivation to learn, with Express Care and Share Power contributing the most. Within these two essential actions, particular action steps that may be points of leverage include: being warm, showing respect, collaborating, and being responsive, since these actions contribute the most.

Personal responsibility

Taking ownership of one's own behaviors and fulfilling commitments are important developmental tasks. We found strong positive associations between personal responsibility and parenting adults who Challenge Growth and Share Power in their relationships with their children. At the action-step level, parents who set expectations, negotiate, and respect their children reported that they have children who assume greater responsibility.

Emotional competence

Emotionally competent children are aware of their own feelings, and they can regulate their emotions in ways that allow them to manage excitement and anger. They also use their feelings to work toward important goals. Parenting adults who described their relationships with their children as high on Share Power, Challenge Growth, and Expand Possibility also reported high levels of child emotional competence. At the action step-level, the strongest predictors were within the essential action of Sharing Power: Negotiate and show respect.

It is noteworthy that Provide Support was *negatively* associated with emotional competence. That is, when children experience higher levels of support, they tend also to show lower levels of emotional competence. However, this counterintuitive association illustrates a limitation of a one-time study that only shows correlations. A more plausible explanation for this finding is that parents provide more support to children who struggle to manage their emotions, reflecting the responsive nature of parenting. Indeed, follow-up analyses suggest that parents of children who struggle with emotional regulation may rely more on action steps such as encouragement and advocacy to help. Not surprising, guide (a Provide Support action step) positively predicts emotional competence.

Prosocial behavior

Prosocial behaviors like being kind and respectful, accepting others who are different, offering help, and sharing were positively associated with Express Care, Challenge Growth, and Share Power. Specific action steps that explain the most difference are being warm, setting high expectations, negotiating, and giving respect.

Effortful control

This measure focuses on a child's ability to concentrate when working on a project, follow instructions, and engage in activities for a long (developmentally appropriate) period of time. Action steps like respect, negotiate, and respond (all part of Share Power) were strong, positive correlates of effortful control.

Linking developmental relationships with RISK BEHAVIORS

Parenting adults who reported giving their children a voice when they disagree about a decision that needs to be made together (negotiate), taking their child seriously, and treating them fairly (respect)—both Share Power action steps—report lower levels of child conduct problems (e.g., fighting, cheating, stealing, throwing temper tantrums) and impulsive behavior. Be warm was also related to lower conduct problems.

Expand Possibility was *positively* related to both risk behaviors. That is, when parents indicated that their child experienced conduct problems or impulsivity, they were more likely to indicate that they expanded possibilities. A closer look at the specific actions reveals the driving force behind this positive association is explore. Parents who indicate their children exhibit conduct problems and

impulsive behavior also report more frequent attempts at exposing their child to new ideas, experiences, and places. Although it is impossible to determine the direction of this association with cross-sectional data, it is possible that these parents are responding to their children's risk behavior by trying to expand their horizons and promote a more positive path forward.

Potential leverage points for impact

When we look across all these measures to determine which essential actions and action steps in developmental relationships are associated with child well-being, thriving, and risk behaviors, some patterns emerge:

- **Share Power** and its associated action steps is the only essential action out of the five with a strong association with all outcomes examined (Display 17). Clearly, something is happening related to this essential action that merits further investigation and innovation—particularly since this essential action is the second least likely of the five essential actions that parenting adults said they actually do with their children.
- **Provide Support** does not uniquely contribute positively to any of the measures of well-being and, in fact, it is negatively associated with some outcomes we seek. Rather than assume that providing support leads to negative outcomes, we may consider, as noted earlier, that these action steps are taken in response to challenges that parenting adults are having with their children.[15] In addition, some of these action steps (such as advocating) may be particularly relevant for some youth, so the effects are not evident in a large sample. Analyses with other datasets, including longitudinal studies, are needed to determine the role of providing support within a developmental relationship.
- **Expand Possibility** offers contradictory insights. If we were to look only at risk behaviors, we might conclude that expanding Possibility is problematic at best and harmful at worst. But we also know that it is also associated positively with several measures of well-being. Again, more research will shed light on these dynamics.
- The other two strategies, **Express Care** and **Challenge Growth,** each contribute to different measures of well-being. This result is a reminder that the ways one might focus interventions based on developmental relationships can vary, depending on the goals or area of focus.
- We will continue to expand the research base to confirm, refine, or reshape the overall understanding of how developmental relationships contribute to positive outcomes for youth.[16] At the same time, we can begin experimenting with low-stakes ways to reinforce the actions and behaviors these analyses suggest might have particular promise for both strengthening developmental relationships and influencing children's outcomes.

Display 18 illustrates this potential by focusing on several of the action steps associated with a number of positive outcomes. Based on the survey items that measure the relevant action steps, these specific behaviors become practical ways that parenting adults can become more intentional in building developmental relationships.

Financial strain: Developmental relationships' role in resilience

As we have previously noted, financial strain appears to undermine family relationships. The 156 families in our sample who reported they "can't buy the things they need sometimes" (our measure of financial strain) tended to report lower levels of developmental relationships. Furthermore, we see throughout the analyses that **experiencing financial strain is the demographic factor that most consistently undermines developmental relationships, family routines and practices, and child well-being.**

Yet, even though financial strain might make it difficult, **a significant subset of these families expressed high levels of each of the five essential actions of a developmental relationship**. When we look only at the financially strained families, our data clearly show that

15 Remember that these analyses only show associations; they don't indicate a direction of influence or causality

16 For updates on this research, visit www.search-institute.org.

Display 18

Specific relationship-building actions that may make the most difference in children's development and well-being

Below are some of the specific action steps (left column) most strongly associated with multiple measures of well-being or character strengths. For each, specific behaviors were assessed in the survey. These specific behaviors are tangible starting points for strengthening developmental relationships.

Action Step	Specific Behaviors (based on survey questions)
Expect	Tell your children that you believe they will have a good future. Expect children to do their best, even when they are doing something they don't like. Tell your children they can do anything they set their mind to.
Negotiate	When you and your child disagree • take time to understand each other's point of view; • work to find a decision that you both think is okay; and • respect one another's point of view, even if you disagree.
Respect	Listen respectfully to your children, even when their ideas don't make sense to you. Build respect with your children. Be fair when you have to discipline your children.
Collaborate	Learn new things together. Solve problems together. Work on projects at home together.
Connect	Connect your child to other non-parental adults who • have a similar hobby or interest; • teach your child about ideas or cultures that are different from their own; and • expose your child to different career paths.
Respond	When you see your children aren't understanding what you're trying to teach, adjust and try to teach or show them in a different way. Develop new interests based on things you've learned from your children. Adjust plans to meet your children's needs, even if they are not your preference.

families exhibiting more developmental relationships have children that score high on our composite measure of key character strengths, as well as their motivation to learn.[17]

In particular, there were significant associations with two of the essential actions and the composite measure of key character strengths:

- **Challenge Growth.** For each additional point scored on Challenge Growth, financially strained families were 6 times more likely to score above the median on key character strengths.[18]
- **Share Power.** For each one-point increase in Share Power, financially strained families were 8 times more likely to score above the median on parenting adults' reports of key character strengths.

17 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

18 The median is the scale score at which half the survey participants scored below and half scored above.

Likewise, Share Power had a strong association with the parent-reported motivation of their children to learn: For each additional point scored on Share Power and Express Care, financially strained families were three and four times, respectively, more likely to score above the median on motivation to learn.

Although causality cannot be established, these findings offer provocative preliminary evidence of the power of family developmental relationships for helping children develop key character strengths, well-being, and learning within families living with financial insecurity. These findings are consistent with prior research on family resilience (e.g., Walsh, 2006). One does not have to have a challenge-free life in order to flourish, and many families facing adversity have internal strengths that help them survive, regenerate, and do well despite the odds (Masten, 2001; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013; Werner & Smith, 2001).

That said, it is important to remember that **families facing financial strain are less likely to experience high levels of developmental relationships.** The challenges of getting by distract from and undermine families' capacities (including time and energy) to engage in the essential actions that are part of a developmental relationship. However, when these families do find ways to share power and challenge growth, the odds that their children are developing key character strengths such as the motivation to learn and an array of social-emotional skills increase dramatically.

These analyses reinforce the need for a dual strategy to engage with and support financially strained families. First, efforts must persist and expand to reduce the systemic challenges and structural barriers that create financial strain for families. At the same time, there is **an opportunity to empower families in the midst of challenging circumstances to do what they can to cultivate developmental relationships** and, in particular, to enhance their capacity to share power and challenge growth. These two essential actions hold promise for engaging families as partners and active agents in reducing inequities that undermine young people's learning, well-being, and thriving.

First steps in an ongoing research agenda

The preceding analyses begin to point to potentially high-leverage essential actions and the corresponding action steps within the overall framework of developmental relationships. However, before making major commitments about how to interpret and use these findings, three important notes are in order.

1. The essential actions and the related action steps that are not highlighted as significant still contribute to an overall experience of developmental relationships, and may still be important in how the total environment influences children's well-being.
2. These associations are based on a cross-sectional sample of parenting adults with children ages 3 to 13. We do not yet have evidence that these patterns will be consistent across other samples (e.g., adolescents) or whether responses from youth and adults will align. Furthermore, we do not know if these same associations will be replicated when focusing on other types of relationships (such as teachers, peers, mentors, or youth workers).
3. As noted previously, we cannot assume a causal relationship from one-time, cross-sectional data. However, this report builds on a field of other studies (see the Selected Research Bibliography) that have established more causal associations between these factors and child well-being. Thus, the results of this study do not, by themselves, document causality, and additional research is needed. However, from a practical perspective, we have confidence that these associations merit active consideration as starting points for actions that can, over time, be tested empirically.

These notes are reminders that the research is just beginning. (For more information on Search Institute's ongoing research in this area, see the Technical Appendix.) Being more circumspect is warranted as we continue to build evidence before using these findings for high-stakes decisions. It is appropriate, however, to begin testing what happens when families are more intentional about expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power and expanding possibility.

Tapping the power of developmental relationships

Recognizing that this study was designed to test "proof of concept," the correlational results are promising. The strength of the correlations, after controlling for demographics, add credence to the central role of relationships in developing young people's character strengths and enhancing other areas of social-emotional well-being, particularly for families facing financial strain.

Beyond the broad association between developmental relationships and our composite measure of character strengths, the correlations at the essential action level are particularly intriguing. In particular, the predictive strength of Share Power highlights the potential for fully engaging children and youth as co-creators of their own development and learning.

This study also shows that the power of developmental relationships connects with families' priorities and capacities. Focusing on developmental relationships thus has the potential to engage with families as partners on their own terms and as partners working together to achieve shared goals for young people's success in school, work, and life.

Everyday Opportunities for Building Developmental Relationships

5

From family meals to shared activities, the routines and patterns of family and community life provide the context in which developmental relationships are nourished or hampered.

Family relationships do not form, grow, or change in a vacuum or a laboratory. They are shaped in the daily habits, schedules, celebrations, and stresses that make up family life. Families are part of a larger web of relationships within the extended family, friends, neighbors, and many others. Where families live, how they spend their time, and whom they interact with all affect the relationships that family members form with each other.

This study also examined some of the factors that influence the capacity of families to create and sustain developmental relationships with each other. Among those factors are parents' self-confidence and stress in their parenting role, how families spend time together, the routines of family life, and how technology affects family relationships. In addition, the study also asked parenting adults about the broader web of relationships in their lives, particularly for their children.

Parents' self-confidence and stress

This section begins by looking at parents' self-confidence and stress. These elements represent the personal capacities and challenges that parenting adults bring into relationships with their kids.

TAKEAWAYS

Developmental relationships are more likely in families when these dynamics are also at work:

- Parenting adults are confident in their parenting and comfortable playing with their children.
- The family has consistent routines and is also adaptable in the midst of changes.
- The family is engaged with the broader community through relationships and civic participation.

Several of these dynamics also modestly enhance the development of character strengths in children after accounting for developmental relationships within the family, though developmental relationships consistently predict more of the variance.

Surprisingly, levels of technology use by parent and child made little difference in the quality of the parent-child developmental relationship.

Our study found that *parental self-confidence* is associated with each essential action within the developmental relationships framework, and it (along with parent-child play, discussed below) explains a

19 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

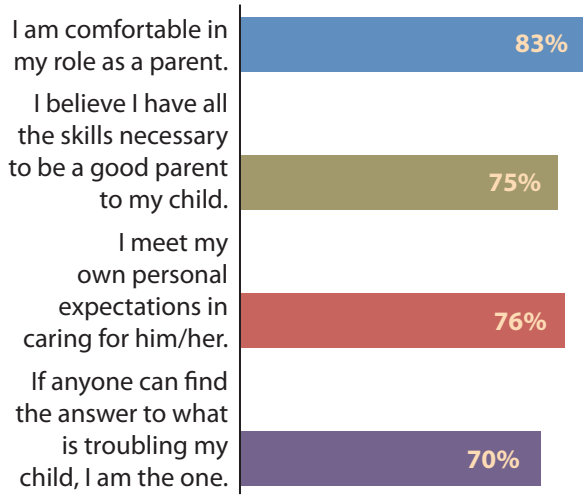
meaningful amount of the differences in each of the five essential actions for building developmental relationships after controlling for demographic factors.[19] As shown in Display 19, parents' self-confidence includes whether they are meeting their own expectations as a parent and are comfortable with and have the skills they need for their parenting role. A large majority of parenting adults who completed our survey expressed high levels of confidence, and there were no differences in levels of confidence by race, Hispanic ethnicity, or the age of the child. However, parenting adults who face greater financial strain expressed less confidence in their parenting than those experiencing less financial strain.[20]

A minority of parenting adults indicated that they feel *stressed, alone, or isolated* by their parenting, although roughly one in four often or very often experience different forms of stress (Display 20). Consistent with parents' self-confidence, levels of stress do not vary by race, Hispanic ethnicity, or the age of the child. However, families experiencing financial strain also experience higher levels of parenting stress than those with less financial strain.

Display 19

Parenting adults' self-confidence

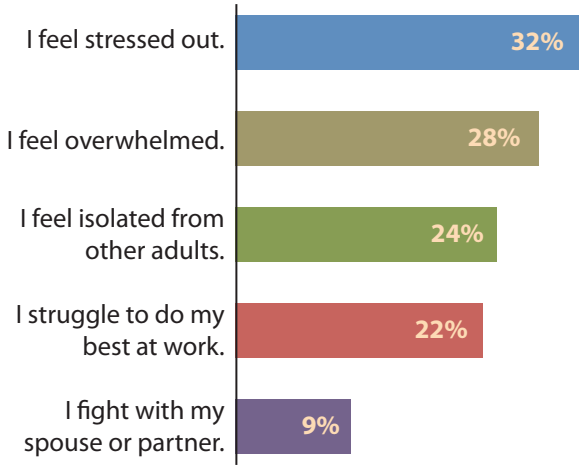
Percentages of parenting adults surveyed who said they agree or strongly agree with each statement.



Display 20

Parenting adults' stress

Percentages of parenting adults who said they often or very often experience the following as a result of their responsibilities as a parent.



Contrary to what we might expect, parenting stress is a positive predictor of Express Care, Support, and Challenge Growth, after controlling for several demographic, child, and parenting factors.[21] However, parenting stress explains very little of the overall levels of each of the essential actions in developmental relationships. This finding suggests that, in the midst of stress, parenting adults and children can work to maintain their relationship—and, potentially, find respite from the stress through their relationships.

Thus, although we cannot assert causality, parental self-confidence may contribute to the strength of their relationships with their children. In each case, when families experience financial strain, parenting adults are less likely to be self-confident and more likely to be stressed, both of which may make it harder to build and maintain a developmental relationship with their children.

Spending time together

Developmental relationships in families form and are shaped by the time family members spend together. In this busy culture, it is easy to focus on counting the specific activities that families do together and what they get done. Yet the parenting adults in our study pointed to the

20 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

21 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

pleasure of just being together, echoing the sentiments of family researcher John Gottman:

> Trivial moments provide opportunities for profound connection. For example, if you're giving your little kid a bath and he splashes and you're impatient, you miss an opportunity to play with him. But if you splash back and you clean up later, you have some fun together and you both get really wet, laugh, and have a beautiful moment. It's ephemeral, small, even trivial—yet it builds trust and connection. (Gottman & Coutu, 2007)

In our online survey, we asked parenting adults an open-ended question about the activities they enjoy doing together as a family at home, in their communities, or during vacations or other special times. The results are summarized in Display 21, highlighting the diverse ways families spend time together and build their relationships. For many parents, the specific activity was less important than the interaction. As one parent wrote, "I enjoy most just playing together as a family."

We also asked them what they enjoy about the activities they identified. Some of the most common themes in their responses included the following:

- Unplugging from technology and distractions
- Experiencing nature and the outdoors
- Creating, learning, and volunteering together
- Being active together as a family

Playing together. The quality of the time that families spend together may be influenced by the extent to which parenting adults are comfortable playing with

22 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

Display 21

What families enjoy doing together

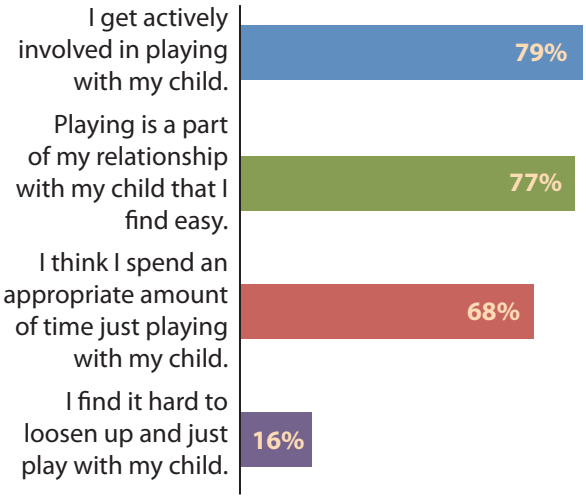
In the online survey, parenting adults were asked an open-ended question about what they enjoyed doing together as a family. Some parents were asked about what they enjoyed at home, while others were asked what they enjoyed in their communities, and others were asked about vacations or other special times. Here are the activities they mentioned. The largest words represent activities that came up most often. Playing together, volunteering, creating, learning, and getting outside surfaced most often in these open-ended responses.

their child (in contrast to more task-focused activities). To explore this potential connection, our survey included a brief measure of parental comfort with play. In our analysis of the survey data, we found that this measure does meaningful influence the degree to which the five essential actions occur within parent-child relationships.[22]

Display 22

Parenting adults' comfort with play

Percentages of parenting adults who said they agree or strongly agree with the following statements.



The survey questions used to measure parenting adults' comfort with play show that most parenting adults are comfortable playing with their children, although about one in five did not endorse feeling comfortable (Display 22). Comfort with play did not vary by race, Hispanic ethnicity, or the child's age, but parenting adults experiencing financial strain were less likely to be comfortable playing with their child than those experiencing less financial strain.

Technology in family life

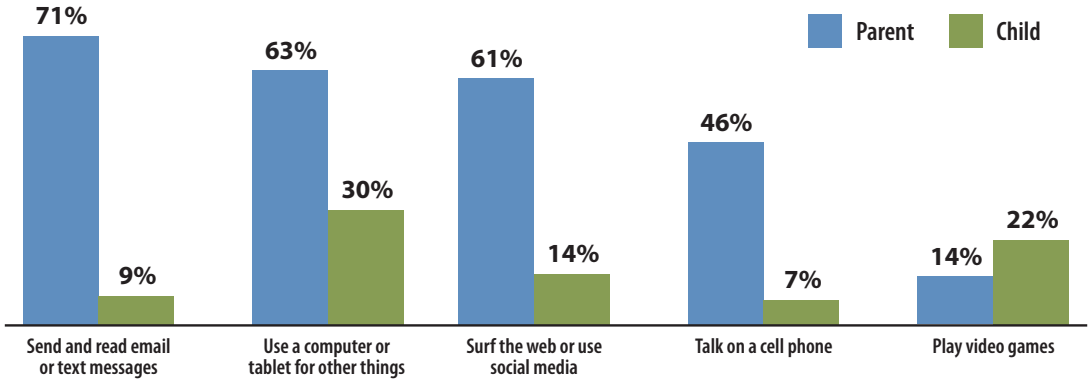
From cell phones to tablets to video games, technology is a ubiquitous part of life for many families, as reinforced by the level of technology use by both children (ages 3 to 13) and parenting adults (Display 23). In our focus groups across diverse cultures, contexts, and economic levels, parenting adults were animated in their opinions about the new challenges and opportunities that technology has introduced into family life. In response to open-ended questions about what they enjoy doing together as a family, parenting adults often pointed to "unplugging from technology" as something they greatly valued.

23 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

Display 23

Daily technology use by parenting adults and their children

Percentage of parenting adults who said that they and their children (ages 3 to 13) engage in each of these activities at least daily.



Note: Parenting adults were asked: "How often, if at all, do YOU do the following *outside of your regular work hours?*" A parallel stem was asked for parent-report of child technology use questions: "How often, if at all, does [YOUR CHILD] do the following *(not including homework)*?" Child technology use may, in part, be low due to the target age range for this study: children ages 3 to 13.

Given the level of concern about technology that parents expressed in the focus groups, it was somewhat surprising that survey data suggest that levels of self-reported technology use make little difference in levels of developmental relationships (either overall or in each essential action), after factoring in several demographic, child, and parent factors.[23] Notably, parenting adults' own level of technology use made a small but statistically significant and positive difference.[24] (Child technology use as reported by parents was negatively associated with Express Care and positive related to Challenge Growth.) Other researchers (e.g., Rudi et al., 2014) have found significant diversity in how families use different technologies, so these general patterns likely mask important variables.

Survey participants who identified as White, Asian, or Pacific Islander reported somewhat lower levels of personal technology use, while parents reported that their youth ages 7 to 10 typically used less technology. There were no differences in parent or child technology use by Hispanic ethnicity or level of financial strain.

In our study, parenting adults reported that they experience technology as both contributing to and detracting from family life, as shown in Display 24. This finding echoes other research that found that some forms of shared media and technology use (such as playing video games together) increased family connectedness, while other forms (such as individual social media use) decreased family connections (Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012; also see O'Keefe et al., 2011; Williams & Merten, 2011). So the ways technology makes family life easier (such as keeping track of each other) may be counterbalanced by the ways that technology makes family life harder (such as staying focused when families are together).

24 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

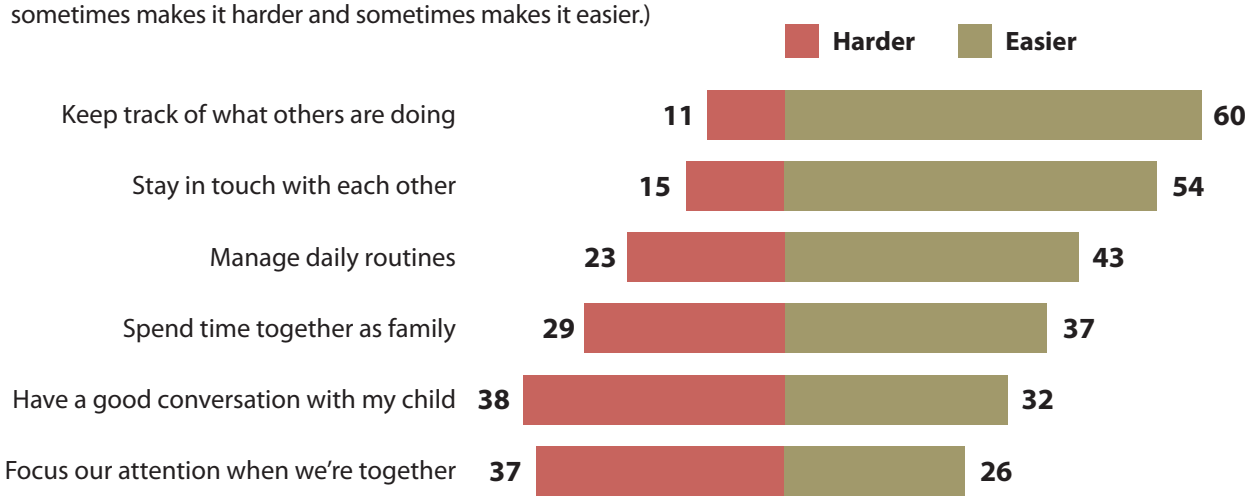
Routines and adaptability: Structure and flow in family life

Established ways of doing things give a dependable rhythm and structure to family life, enhancing relationships, cultivating skills, and contributing to healthy socialization (Denham, 2003; Fiese et al., 2002; Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Without such routines, family life becomes chaotic and unpredictable. Routines may be particularly important for families in challenging circumstances or who have experienced

Display 24

How technology affects family life

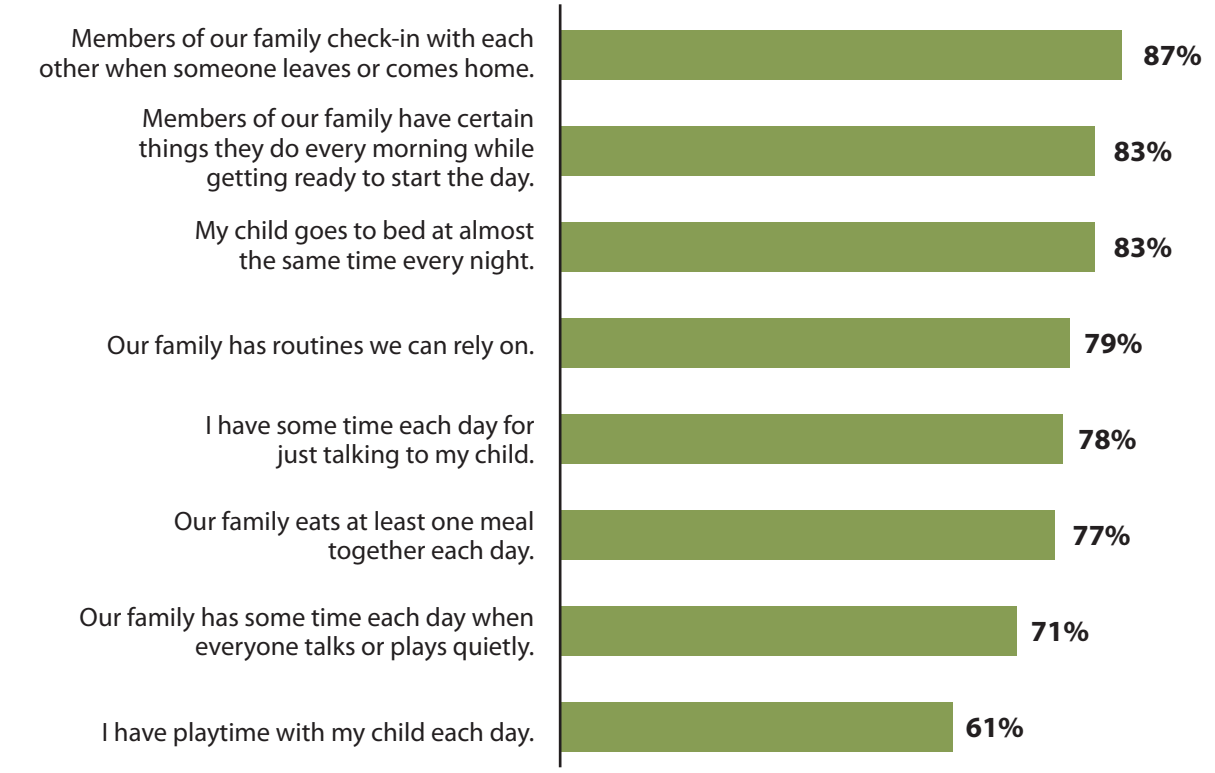
Percentages of parenting adults who said that technology makes it somewhat or a lot harder (red bars) or easier (brown bars) to do each of these activities in their families. (The remaining participants indicated that technology sometimes makes it harder and sometimes makes it easier.)



Display 25

Consistent routines in families

Percentages of parenting adults who reported that each of these statements is often or very often true in their family.



crises or major transitions (Roche & Ghazarian, 2012). At the same time, routines without flexibility can become constraining, pushing family members to detach (Olson, DeFrain, & Skogrand, 2008). Thus, this study examined both the routines in family life and family adaptability.

For routines (Display 25), families are most likely to have habits in place for keeping track of each other, getting up and going to bed consistently, just talking together, and having at least one meal together. They are least likely to play together daily or spend quiet time together. For adaptability (Display 26), a total of 89% of parenting adults said they stick together when dealing with something difficult, but they were less likely to say they adapt easily to big changes.

When we look at routines and adaptability within various subgroups of families, we see the following:

- **Financial strain.** Families experiencing high financial strain score significantly lower on measures of both routines and adaptability than those families who report little or no financial strain.
- **Child's age.** Adaptability is consistent across the different age groups of children. However, routines are highest for those ages 7 to 10 and lowest for children ages 11 to 13. This finding likely reflects the significant transitions that begin happening as children move into early adolescence.
- **Relationship to child.** Routines are most consistent in families with foster parents or guardians; they are lowest in families with stepparents. (Others are in-between.) Adaptability does not vary.
- These differences in routines may reflect the unique challenges of different family

configurations. For example, previous research (e.g., Coleman & Ganong, 1997) has highlighted the complexity of developing shared routines in families that seek to blend two family patterns with ambiguous roles between the families, which may explain some of this difference. In contrast, foster families typically emphasize the need to provide consistent routine as a core commitment they make in bringing a child into their family (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003).

- **Race or Hispanic ethnicity.** There are no statistically significant differences on either routines or adaptability.

These findings remind us of the structural factors in the economy and in society that can impinge on families' abilities to maintain the regular routines through which they build and maintain their relationships.

Consistent with previous research, our analyses showed moderate to strong correlations for both family routines and adaptability with each of the five essential actions in the developmental relationships framework: Express Care; Challenge Growth; Provide Support; Share Power; and Expand Possibility. Routines and adaptability predict between 14% and 21% of the variance in key character strengths and other measures of well-being and 5% to 8% of the variance in risk behaviors (conduct problems and impulsivity). These figures are comparable to the percentages explained by the essential actions in developmental relationships. However, when entered into models simultaneously, the developmental relationship actions are consistently stronger correlates than routines and adaptability.[25] That said, it is likely that these family dynamics interact with relationships in ways that are mutually reinforcing.

People and places beyond the immediate family

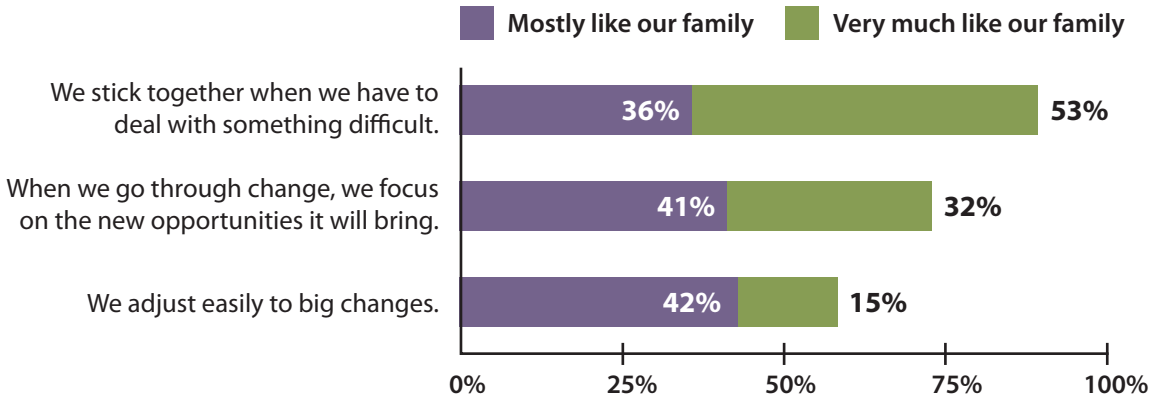
Families live in apartments, neighborhoods, towns, cities, villages, and rural areas where they interact with other people and places. Those interactions affect both the family and the larger community, in small and sometimes large ways (Mancini, Bowen, & Martin, 2005). Thus, a discussion of developmental relationships within families is not complete until it is situated in a wider web of relationships and structures in community life. Our survey examined parenting adults' perspectives on four community connections: how parenting adults connect their kids with other adults beyond the immediate family, such as in the extended family, school, and community; relationships in the neighborhood; the ways the family contributes to the community; and the help-seeking attitudes of parents.

25 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

Display 26

Adaptability in families

Percentages of parenting adults who said each statement is mostly like or very much like their family.



How parents connect their kids with other adults

Survey participants highlighted a wide range of people and places when asked an open-ended question about how they connect their kids with others in their community. Most frequently they mentioned extended family members, their friends and other parents, and leaders or members in schools and other organizations. A few parenting adults indicated that they do not try to connect their child with other adults. The following quotes illustrate how parents build these connections:

- "I try to have a 'yes' policy with family members that want to do things with him, so he can have exposure to other adults besides his parents."
- "I often connect her with friends and other family members who are interested in the same things she is. I might say, 'You should ask Aunt Ashley about ballet.'"
- "I expose him often to a wide variety of people, family and friends of mine, who can let him see the options available to him as he grows up."
- "She is very connected to all of my friends. They enjoy having her around and teaching her about the things that they like to do."
- "He visits our neighbor, a single older man who is his grandpa's age. This neighbor repairs bikes as a hobby, so he has around 20 bikes on his front porch at any given time. My son helps him in fixing them, learning something new every time."

Future studies will examine relationships between young people and non-parenting adults (and peers) in their lives, including teachers, mentors, coaches, and youth workers. Parents can play a critical role in making those connections, encouraging other trustworthy adults to build developmental relationships with their children (Scales, 2003).

Help-seeking attitudes of parents

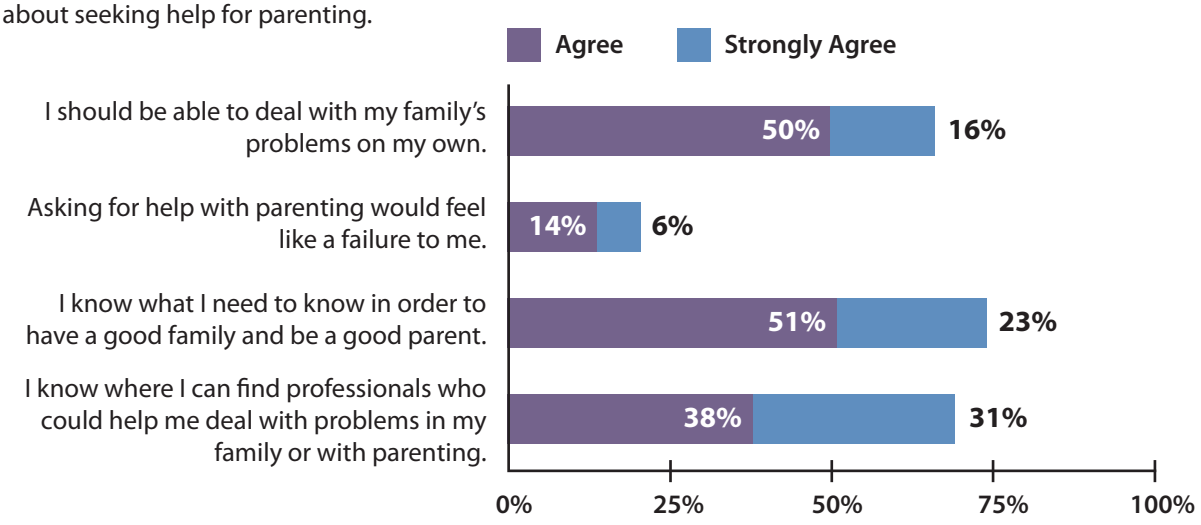
Parenting adults do not need to be perfect in order to build developmental relationships. Although being a perfect parent is not necessary for building developmental relationships, a parent's willingness and ability to ask for and find help is a sign of strength. As such, our study also asked a series of questions about whether they believe they know what they need to know in order to solve parenting issues on their own. We also asked if they knew where to get help if they needed it.

Across all questions, most parenting adults surveyed feel confident that they can handle problems that come up,

Display 27

Parenting adults' attitudes toward seeking help for parenting

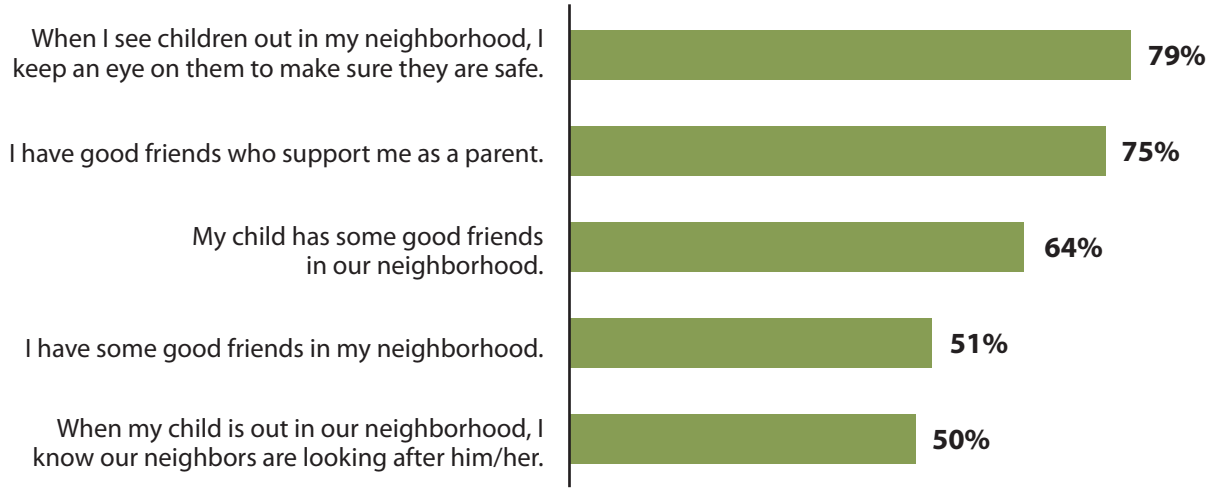
Percentages of parenting adults who said they agree or strongly agree with each of the following statements about seeking help for parenting.



Display 28

Neighborhood connections for families

Percentages of parenting adults who said each statement often or very often represents their family's experience in their neighborhood.



and most feel like they know what they need to know to be good parents (Display 27). One in five (20%), however, indicated that asking for help would be an admission of failure. Approximately the same proportion (21%) indicated that they did not know where to get professional help if they needed it.

Once again, we see differences in openness to seeking help between those facing financial strain and those not.

Community connections

A large body of research has highlighted the power of community connections both for establishing norms and for creating trust within a neighborhood or community (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; O'Brien & Kauffman, 2013; Sampson, 2012). Our survey asked a series of questions about relationships in the neighborhood for both the parent and their child (Display 28) as well as the ways the parent and family are politically or civically involved in their community (Display 29). When pulled together into an overall measure, we gain a broad perspective on the extent to which families are connected to their community. We can also examine the extent to which these connections relate to how children are doing after accounting for developmental relationships within the family.

Overall, **fewer than 1 in 10 (8%) of families score high on this measure of community connectedness.** There are no statistical differences in levels of community connections by Hispanic ethnicity or the child's age. Families who self-identified as another race ("Other") scored significantly higher on community connection than the other racial subgroups.

Consistent with other findings in this study, we also see differences based on financial strain, with families with high or some financial strain having significantly lower levels of community connections than families with little to no financial strain.

Do these connections matter for children's development? In regression models predicting a range of well-being indicators, connection to community predicts between 2% and 11% of the variance.[26] Even after several demographic, child, and parent factors are controlled for, and the five essential actions in developmental relationships are factored into the model, connection to community remains a positive predictor of key character strengths, emotional competence, and effortful control.

26 For details on these analyses, see the Technical Appendix.

Display 29

Civic participation of parents and families

Family Volunteering	0 times	1 – 2 times	3 or more times
In a typical month, about how many times do two or more members of your immediate family spend time together helping other people in your community?	33%	45%	22%
Personal Action	**Rarely or never**	**Sometimes**	**Often or very often**
I spend time on projects with other people to help the community.	47%	35%	18%
I do things to help people in my neighborhood.	36%	41%	24%
I make an effort to help the environment, such as recycling or picking up trash in public places.	15%	28%	57%
Personal Beliefs	**Disagree**	**Somewhat agree, somewhat disagree**	**Agree**
I believe that I can make a difference in my community.	9%	28%	63%
I think it is important to change things that are unfair in society.	2%	18%	80%

This finding reinforces a central theme of this study: Strengthening family relationships is a critical and powerful contributor to whether parents see their children developing key character strengths. Other factors in the community may also make a difference; yet a more powerful leverage point likely lies in strengthening developmental relationships in families. Noteworthy, of course, is that **families with stronger developmental relationships are more likely to be engaged in the community**, suggesting that strong bonds in the family are mutually reinforcing with strong connections in the community.

Family relationships in context

Relationships happen in the real world, at specific times and places, and within a history of the relationship itself. For some young people, these broader factors are springboards for deeper and richer relationships. For other young people, they can be like quicksand that can sink them.

Family dynamics

This study has begun to examine some factors within families that provide the context for developmental relationships, including some of the parenting adults'

attitudes and experiences, how technology influences relationships, and the ways families maintain routines and adapt to change. Although by no means exhaustive, these family dynamics illustrate the influences within families that can either enhance or thwart developmental relationships.

Relationships beyond the family

Young people do not, of course, experience developmental relationships only in families. Developmental relationships can and should also occur in other areas of the life of a young person: in schools, in out-of-school programs, in communities and beyond. This assertion is bolstered by studies that show young people have the best chance of developing key character strengths when they are embedded in a web of many positive relationships with adults and peers in and outside their families (Olson, DeFrain, & Skogrand, 2008; Scales, 2003; Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006; Walsh, 2003).

Although focused within families, this study has begun to extend the context to a broader web of relationships and opportunities in the community that can reinforce or complement the relationships within families. While a number of the parenting adults we surveyed expressed reluctance to connect their children with other adults and other opportunities, the majority said they see the value of a broader web of relationships in their extended families, social network, and neighborhoods. Future Search Institute studies will unpack the ways in which this broader web of relationships is also developmental.

Structural barriers for families

This study has offered evidence that families who experience financial strain struggle more to find the time and energy to invest in family relationships. Beyond that finding, however, this study does not delve deeply into the structural and systemic barriers that some families experience in their communities and that interfere with developmental relationships and other areas of family life. These barriers include discrimination and racism, lack of access to resources (such as affordable housing, health care, transportation, and healthy food), and other inequalities and obstacles in our society.

Search Institute's future studies and engagements with schools, out-of-school time programs, and communities will identify and help to implement strategies for removing these structural barriers. This study sets the stage for a long-term focus on creating and strengthening relationships in young people's lives, and doing it in ways that contribute toward creating a more equitable society for each and every young person and family.

6 Reimagining Family Engagement: Six Critical Shifts

The developmental relationships framework points to critical opportunities to energize and reframe the ways schools, organizations, and communities partner with families.

Don't forget the families! This report's title is a starting point for action. Rather than ignoring, compensating for, blaming, or otherwise overlooking the resources and strengths of America's diverse families, it is time to rethink and reimagine why and how we partner with families in our schools, programs, and coalitions.

If taken seriously, this study's findings can help to catalyze two important, interlocking agendas:

1 *Don't Forget the Families* challenges us to **move beyond platitudes about the importance of relationships in young people's lives.** How do we become much more intentional and specific about the kinds of relationships kids need at home, at school, and in other places they spend time? The framework of developmental relationships offers a starting point, providing initial evidence that the actions within the framework have potential to help children and youth develop key character strengths that are essential for their success and well-being.

At one level, this report—and other emerging research on developmental relationships—aims to stimulate a broader conversation about developmental relationships for young people across the places where they spend time and among the significant people in their lives. Though we start by examining parent-child relationships in families, we are building theory and evidence that suggest these same kinds of relationships matter across many contexts (such as schools and programs) and relationships (parents, teachers, mentors, and peers).

2 The findings of *Don't Forget the Families* press for **re-examining assumptions about families, their roles in young people's lives, and the fundamental ways schools, organizations, and systems relate to parenting adults.** This study has at least six major implications, each of which requires shifts in how schools, youth programs, and coalitions think about and enact partnerships with families. To be sure, these recommendations are consistent with many effective practices, and we have much to learn from them. However, a more intentional focus, a deeper commitment, and new innovations are needed to fill in this missing piece in America's diverse efforts to help all children succeed.

Shift 1: Start with listening to families

In too many cases, family engagement efforts begin with policy makers, researchers, and professionals determining what families need to do, and then developing messages that will generate "buy-in," support, and participation. They treat parents as consumers, who must be "sold" an agenda in order to be successful in achieving their goals.

Setting aside questions of whether that approach works in consumer product development, marketing, and sales, it is clearly flawed in how we engage families as active agents, partners, and leaders in cultivating key

TAKEAWAYS

These six shifts in emphasis (which some schools, organizations, and coalitions already do) are needed to engage families as key actors and partners in developing key character strengths in young people through developmental relationships.

From a primary focus on . . .	Toward an emphasis on . . .
• Starting with messaging to families	• Starting with listening to families
• Providing programs for families	• Building relationships with families
• Buying into negative stereotypes of families	• Highlighting families' strengths, even amid challenges
• Giving families expert advice about what to do	• Encouraging families to experiment with new practices
• Focusing on parenting as a set of techniques	• Emphasizing parenting as a relationship
• Building coalitions of formal systems to support children's success	• Engaging families in strengthening relationships as a critical component of community coalitions

character strengths and well-being. Leaders in design thinking, improvement science, and other approaches to change and improvement consistently emphasize the critical need to use a variety of means to listen first to stakeholders—not just to get feedback on ideas, but also to develop an empathetic, deep understanding of stakeholders' lived experiences (Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Bryk et al., 2015; IDEO, 2015).

Whenever we authentically take time to listen to and build an understanding of parenting adults and children through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and other methods, we are much more likely to abandon simplistic stereotypes or untested assumptions and to partner with them in ways that are more meaningful and more effective.

Shift 2: Emphasize building relationships with families

Educators, social workers, and other professionals who successfully engage families—particularly those families who have been disconnected—invariably point to the critical need to build trust and relationships as a foundation for engagement (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Axford et al., 2012; Mason, 2012). To adapt the widely quoted and adapted aphorism, "Parents don't care what you know until they know that you care."

Although the developmental relationships framework focuses on the relationships young people need in their lives, it also suggests new and more effective ways to build relationships between professionals and the young people, parents, and other family members they serve. For example, looking at family engagement through the lens of the developmental relationships framework might lead educators and others to ask themselves questions, such as these:

- To what extent do we *express care* with the families in our networks, including listening to them, showing interest in their lives, and investing in them?
- In what ways do we *challenge growth* by setting clear expectations, inspiring them to be their best—and inviting them to do the same for us as professionals working with their children?
- How do we *provide support* and advocacy when families need it?

- How do we *share power* and responsibility in our efforts, empowering families and developing their autonomy and voice?
- How do we help families *expand possibility*, by connecting them to other people, ideas, and opportunities?

These are not programmatic questions, but relational ones. It is important to note that many people in the community can form these relationships with families, including other families. Thus, the call is not to hire more professionals to form relationships with parenting adults and families, but rather to work with families to embed them in webs of relationships that both support them and fully engage them in the life of the school, organization, or community.

Part of the challenge is that a solid majority of parenting adults is not looking for help from professionals. In our survey, three-fourths of parenting adults believed they knew what they needed to know to be a good parent, and two-thirds believed they should be able to deal with their family's problems on their own. And we know from other research that, when they do want help or support, they will first turn to their extended family and social network, not professionals (Martin, Gardner, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012). Furthermore, families who struggle the most often have weaker social connections and supports (Attree, 2005; Bowman et al., 2012; Melton, 2010).

An opportunity, then, lies in strengthening the formal and informal social bonds—particularly with other families and parenting adults who share common priorities, challenges, and interests—so that families have trustworthy people they can turn to when they need more support or encouragement. Doing so will also cultivate readiness to turn to formal supports in times when they are really needed (Attree, 2005).

This focus on cultivating relationships can be transformative both to the organizations and networks that cultivate them and to the participating families. Maton (2008) examined characteristics of organizations that empowered people to take action for positive social change. At the center of his model is a focus on creating a relational culture. He wrote: "What is apparent across domains and types of settings . . . is the potential of a vital and vibrant relational community, over time, to empower its members" (p. 14).

Shift 3: Challenge stereotypes and highlight strengths in families

As a society, we hold onto a number of myths or preconceptions about families:

- We equate family composition (who is in the family) with family strengths or deficits—even though this study and others have shown both strengths and challenges across all types of families. A key message of this study is that demographics account for very little of the difference in family relationships, and they contribute little to whether children and youth are developing key character strengths. Families of all shapes and sizes can—and do—build developmental relationships.
- We assume that families who don't show up don't care, when the evidence consistently shows that the vast majority of parenting adults do care, even if some don't express it effectively. In addition, their greatest value in young people's development likely lies in what they do at home, which is reinforced by this study as well as other research on family engagement (Mapp & Hong, 2010; Robinson & Harris, 2014a).
- Because some families don't have much materially, we conclude they don't have much to contribute. So we set up systems in which they are viewed as passive recipients of our expertise or generosity. This paternalistic approach misses the value they bring to community when they are valued as partners and contributors.

The results of this study reinforce that families have both strengths and challenges across the socioeconomic and cultural spectrum. Yes, some families struggle with addictions, mental illness, abuse, and other issues that require specialized supports. But it is a mistake to label whole groups of parents as inadequate because of their backgrounds or where they live. Indeed, Attree (2005) found that a consistent barrier for low-income parents seeking and receiving support was professionals who made them feel inadequate or like "bad parents."

We now have an opportunity to begin counteracting the negative stereotypes and, over time, to create a

different cultural narrative (and organizational norms) about the strengths of all types of families and their contributions to our communities and society.

Shift 4: Encourage parents to try new approaches to relationships

Developmental relationships form and grow through everyday interactions that occur over time. Sometimes the ways families spend time together and interact with each other effectively cultivate developmental relationships. But families across the spectrum fall into patterns or habits that can be counterproductive—whether it's the ways they do or don't show affection, how they praise or encourage each other, or the ways they keep or share power in family life.

One way schools and youth-serving organizations can begin helping families build developmental relationships is to invite them to try out some new practices or activities that introduce or align with the core actions in the developmental relationships framework. Chapter 7 provides practical tips and relationship-building activities families can do together to explore the essential actions in the framework.

Bringing families together to talk about what works for them and where they get stuck can serve as a starting point for creating a shared commitment to building developmental relationships within families and across the community.

Search Institute's website ParentFurther.com offers a wide range of activities that families can do together to explore and enhance each of the essential actions and action steps in the developmental relationships framework.

Shift 5: Emphasize parenting as primarily a relationship

Judging from social media, TV talk shows, and bookstore shelves, the secret of parenting is to master a set of techniques or strategies that shape or control a child's behaviors. We join with other researchers who have argued that, at its core, parenting is a relationship rooted in mutual affection, attachment, and influence that occur between parenting adult and child (Tuttle, Knudson-Martin, & Kim, 2012).

The most provocative finding in this study is the importance of sharing power within a developmental relationship. More than any other essential action, Share Power consistently predicted children's development of character strengths and attainment of other key measures of well-being. More than any other, this essential effort exemplifies the bidirectional nature of the parent-child relationship, reinforcing mutuality as an integral part of development. As such, action steps to encourage sharing power might be a good place for parenting adults to experiment with new approaches to building relationships with their children.

Shift 6: Broaden coalitions to include families

Under the banner of "collective impact," many worthwhile efforts are underway in communities across the nation to bring greater coherence and effectiveness to efforts to help all children succeed. Most of those partnerships are focused on achieving goals such as school readiness, third-grade reading proficiency, high school graduation, and post-secondary completion. And most of the people who are participating in the initiatives that are being implemented to achieve those objectives work in schools, out-of-school time providers, social service agencies, and other organizations that influence children's lives.

Those are good goals and many of the right participants. But in many communities, families are the missing piece of the strategy. Truly engaging many families will require an approach that is very different from asking them to support schools in teaching reading and math or to helping to raise money for after-school programs. Supporting parents in building developmental relationships within and beyond their families that benefit their children is a strategy that has untapped potential to help children succeed in school and in life.

7 Bringing Developmental Relationships Home: Tips and Relationship Builders

Every family can strengthen developmental relationships. This section offers everyday ideas and activities parenting adults can use to build developmental relationships in their families.

Every family has and can build relationships that guide children on a path of self-fulfillment and success in life. Family members do this through the everyday ways they interact with, care for, and invest in our relationships in our families.

Search Institute, a national applied-research organization, has been asking parents and kids about their relationships. What are they like? Why do they matter? What makes a difference?

Developmental relationships

Out of this research grew the framework of developmental relationships (Display 30). It identifies a total of five essential actions and twenty action steps that you can use as a parent in your relationships to help your children grow up well. Many relationships can include these actions. They are foundational to family life.

When we asked 1,085 parenting adults of 3 to 13 year olds from across the United States about these different actions, we found that some are quite common. Most parents said they Express Care, Challenge Growth, and Provide Support in their relationships with their kids. However, fewer than half said they Share Power and Expand Possibility. (The specific survey results are included with the activities that follow.)

The good news is that all types of families from all kinds of backgrounds can—and do—build developmental relationships. So don't be surprised if you already do many things in the developmental relationships framework. But there are probably things you could do more often or more intentionally. And others may be new ideas you want to try as you work to help your children grow up well.

Why do these actions matter?

The research of Search Institute and others shows that when parenting adults consistently take the kinds of relationship-building actions described in the

This chapter is designed to be a stand-alone resource for parents. It may be copied in limited numbers for nonprofit, educational use. Source: Pekel, K., Roehlkepartain, E. C., Syvertsen, A. K., & Scales, P. C. (2015). *Don't forget the families: The missing piece in America's effort to help all children succeed.* Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute. Available at **www.search-institute.org/dff**

For more information on strategies and activities you can use to build developmental relationships in families, please visit **www.parentfurther.com**

Display 30

Search Institute's developmental relationships framework

This framework of developmental relationships identifies five essential actions supported by twenty action steps that contribute to young people developing a group of key character strengths. Each action is bidirectional, with each person interacting with and influencing the other. For the purpose of clarity, however, the framework is expressed below from the perspective of one young person in a developmental relationship.

Express Care: Show that you like me and want the best for me.

- **Listen**—Pay attention when you are with me.
- **Be Warm**—Let me know that you like being with me and express positive feelings toward me.
- **Invest**—Commit time and energy to doing things for and with me.
- **Show Interest**—Make it a priority to understand who I am and what I care about.
- **Be Dependable**—Be someone I can count on and trust.

Challenge Growth: Insist that I try to continuously improve.

- **Inspire**—Help me see future possibilities for myself.
- **Expect**—Make it clear that you want me to live up to my potential.
- **Stretch**—Recognize my thoughts and abilities while also pushing me to go a bit further.
- **Limit**—Hold me accountable for appropriate boundaries and rules.

Provide Support: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

- **Encourage**—Praise my efforts and achievements.
- **Guide**—Provide practical assistance and feedback to help me learn.
- **Model**—Be an example I can learn from and admire.
- **Advocate**—Stand up for me when I need it.

Share Power: Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.

- **Respect**—Take me seriously and treat me fairly.
- **Negotiate**—Give me a voice in making decisions that affect me.
- **Respond**—Understand and adjust to my needs, interests, and abilities.
- **Collaborate**—Work with me to accomplish goals and solve problems.

Expand Possibility: Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.

- **Explore**—Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.
- **Connect**—Introduce me to people who can help me grow.
- **Navigate**—Help me work through barriers that could stop me from achieving my goals.

developmental relationships framework, their children are more likely to develop key character strengths. (See Display 31.) They are more responsible, have a greater sense of purpose, are more caring, set goals for themselves, and are more engaged in learning.

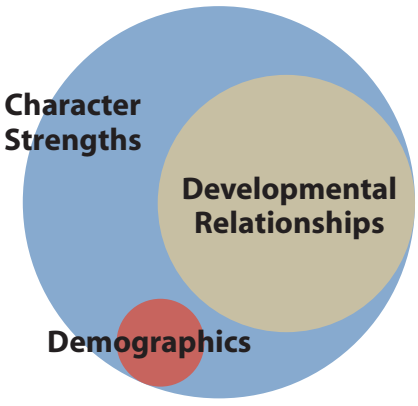
What you can do

It's one thing to see and agree to a list of actions that are part of a developmental relationship. It's another thing to focus on strengthening a relationship. The following pages provide a variety of tips and activities you can use in your family to be more intentional in how you build developmental relationships. Doing so not only can help your children learn and thrive, but it can also be fun.

Display 31

Predicting young people's character strengths

Developmental relationships in families play a powerful role in children's growth. Based on analyses of the association between overall developmental relationships and a composite measure of character strengths, developmental relationships in families contribute 42% of the difference in parents' reports of key character strengths. Demographics such as income, race or ethnicity, and family composition contribute 4% of the variance.



Note: Based on stepwise regression analysis.

Using these ideas and activities

The tips and relationship-building activities on the following pages are intended to help you strengthen relationships in your family. In general, the tips are parenting practices that can be used many times. In contrast, most of the Relationship Builders are one-time activities that get you started with some new ways to strengthen developmental relationships together.

All of the tips and activities are organized around the five essential actions for creating and sustaining developmental relationships. These tips and activities were designed for use with children between ages 3 and 13—the same ages that are the focus of the Search Institute study. Feel free to adapt the strategies to meet the needs of your children.

Trying the tips and activities suggested here will not by themselves transform your relationship with your children. Authentic and powerful relationships take time. But using these ideas can help you become more intentional about building the kinds of relationships that have emerged through Search Institute's research.

You may be using many of these approaches already. When we interviewed diverse groups of parents across the country, however, many of them told us that they were not regularly doing many of these things and that they would welcome a simple list they could use to try them out.

How to get started

In Display 32, you'll find a Developmental Relationships Checklist. Have each family member complete the checklist separately, then compare notes. Talk about areas where there are differences between how family members view your relationships.

Notice, appreciate, and celebrate the strengths you see. Identify the challenges you want to work on together. Then try some of the ideas and relationship-building activities that follow.

Planning ahead and taking time to do activities may seem a bit awkward at first if that is not the way you have previously interacted with your children. If you want to enhance your family relationships, however, stretching yourself to try some new things can really pay

Display 32

A developmental relationships checklist for your family

Checkmark each action that you think is consistently true about your family.
(This is a discussion starter and a self-reflection tool, not a formal assessment.)

Express Care: Show that you like me and want the best for me.	
____ We pay attention when we are together.	**Listen**
____ We like being together. We express positive feelings to each other.	**Be warm**
____ We commit time and energy to doing things for and with each other.	**Invest**
____ We make it a priority to understand who each other is and what we care about.	**Show interest**
____ We can count on and trust each other.	**Be dependable**
Challenge Growth: Insist that I try to continuously improve.	
____ We help each other see future possibilities for ourselves.	**Inspire**
____ We make it clear that we want each other to live up to our potential.	**Expect**
____ We recognize each other's thoughts and abilities while also pushing each other to go a bit further.	**Stretch**
____ We hold each other accountable to appropriate boundaries and rules.	**Limit**
Provide Support: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.	
____ We praise each other's efforts and achievements.	**Encourage**
____ We provide practical assistance and feedback to help each other learn.	**Guide**
____ We try to be examples that each other can learn from and admire.	**Model**
____ We stand up for each other when we need it.	**Advocate**
Share Power: Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.	
____ We take each other seriously and treat each other fairly.	**Respect**
____ Each of us has a say in making decisions that affect us.	**Negotiate**
____ We understand and adjust to each other's needs, interests, and abilities.	**Respond**
____ We work together to accomplish goals and solve problems.	**Collaborate**
Expand Possibility: Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.	
____ We expose each to new ideas, experiences, and places.	**Explore**
____ We introduce each to people who can help us grow.	**Connect**
____ We help each other work through barriers that could stop one of us from achieving our goals.	**Navigate**

off. Like many things in life, practice is essential for improvement.

As you try activities keep track of what you do and how it goes, using a form in Display 33.

Express care

"I listen. And I believe in him just as much as he believes in me. So I try to support him by being interested in what he likes, and trying it out."

Expressing care is the foundation of relationships. When we express care to our children, we show them that we like them and want the best for them. We show our kids that we care by how we listen, show warmth, invest time and energy, and are someone they can count on. Try these ideas and activities to expand how you express care in your family.

Tips for expressing care

- When you see your child for the first time in a while (such as after waking up in the morning or coming home from school), ask how he or she is doing. Do not, however, use the phrase "How are you doing?" as another way to say hello without expecting or wanting an answer in return. Instead, ask it as a genuine question, listen to or probe for an answer, and then ask a follow-up question or make a comment that lets your child know that you really heard what he or she had to say.

WANT MORE?

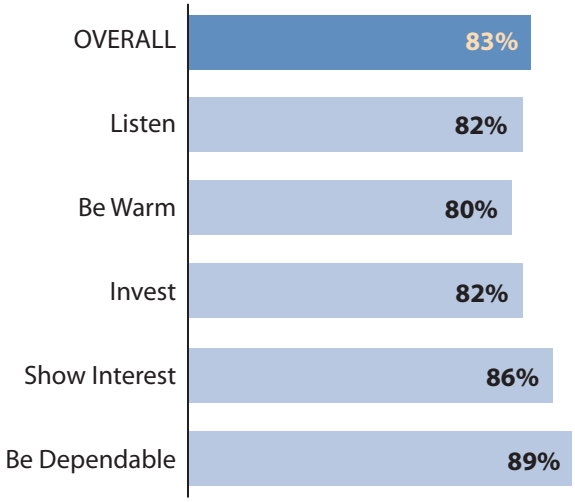
ParentFurther

a Search Institute resource for families

Visit www.ParentFurther.com, Search Institute's website for families, to find quizzes, conversation starters, activities, and other tools to strengthen developmental relationships in your family.

Express care: Parents' perspectives

Percentage of parenting adults who report strength in each action that expresses care in their relationship with their child.



Based on a Search Institute survey of 1,085 U.S. parents with children ages 3 to 13.

- Focus attention on your child when he or she is talking about things that are important to her or him. Put away the smartphone.
- Show interest in each other's *sparks*, which are deep interests or abilities that tap into your deepest passions. Support each other in exploring and developing these interests or passions.
- Have fun when you're together. Smile. Laugh. Never hesitate to be silly with your younger child (that's not always true with teenagers).
- Ask follow-up questions so both you and your child know you're listening to each other.
- When your child tells you about something he or she cares about or shows you something he or she has made or done, ask to know or to see more about it. Go beyond nodding or saying "great job" to ask what he or she is interested in or proud of.
- Find satisfaction in doing things for your child, even if those things aren't important to you.
- Make an effort to understand your child's point of view when he or she shares ideas or opinions.
- When your child tells you that he or she is struggling with or wondering about something, find

opportunities to check in to see how things are going before your son or daughter raises the issue again.

- When your child says he or she has a problem, try not to immediately jump to offering a solution. Focus on understanding and empathizing first, and then see if your child has any ideas about a solution before you offer your ideas.
- Do what you say you will do with your child. When you can't, apologize.
- Participate in your child's imaginary world, whether that means becoming a character or imagining you are in another place. Convey enthusiasm for the world your child has created in her or his head.

Relationship builder 1: Unplug and focus

Select a period of time during which you will pay attention only to your child and will avoid even glances at your phone, television, computer, or other distractions. This might be harder than you think!

Choose a time period that will be noticeable for your child and something of a challenge for you, whether that means half an hour or half a day. Don't tell your child that you are intentionally avoiding distractions. Just make him or her feel like the center of your universe for a while by talking, playing a game, making something, or any other activity your child will enjoy.

If , the first time you try it, you have a good experience unplugging from the world to focus on your child, then make it a regular part of your family life.

Relationship builder 2: Say they matter most

Make a list of all the things you do in your life, from going to your job to paying bills to shopping for groceries and other general or unique things you often do. At the top of the list put your child's (or your children's) name. Show it to your child and tell her or him that they are more important to you than all those other things. Explain why you care about them so much.

Relationship builder 3: Surface strengths

Find a time when your family is together and ask everyone to write down the qualities they like about a member of the family on slips of paper. Have them only write down the qualities—such as being hard working, or considerate, or funny—without writing down the name of the family member they are thinking about.

After everyone has finished writing, put all of the slips in a bowl and then pass the bowl among the family members and ask each person to pick and read one (with reading assistance, if necessary). After each good quality is read, ask people to guess which member of the family the good quality describes.

End the activity by stressing how many good qualities exist in your family.

Relationship builder 4: What's valuable to you?

Ask your child to imagine that your family has been invited to get on a spaceship to go live on another planet together. Tell your child that each of you has only 15 minutes to select five physical objects from your home to bring along with you. Ask your child to take a minute to think about what he or she would bring.

If your child is old enough, ask him or her to write the things down before sharing them with you. While your child shares the things she or he would bring, write them down. While your child is writing or thinking about the question, do the same.

Then ask your child to share the first thing he or she would bring, and why. Next tell your child the first thing you would bring, and why. No judgments allowed! Just talk about why the things you chose were most important to you. Think about what her or his responses tell you about your child.

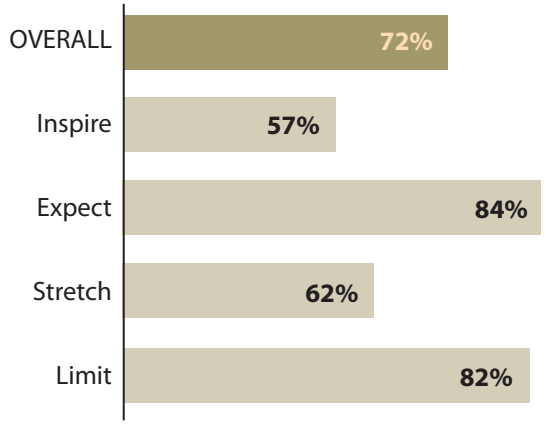
Challenge growth

"Having high expectations means a lot in our house. You know? An 'F because you didn't try' is not the same as an 'F and you gave everything you had.'"

We all need nudges that push us to work hard on achieving our goals. We challenge our kids to grow by pushing them beyond what's comfortable, raising questions, and testing their abilities in ways that are demanding, stimulating, and motivating. We also help them keep them heading in a positive direction by setting appropriate limits. These

Challenge growth: Parents' perspectives

Percentage of parenting adults who report strength in each action step that challenges growth in their relationship with their child.



Based on a Search Institute survey of 1,085 U.S. parents with children ages 3 to 13.

ideas and activities can help you examine how you challenge growth in your child.

Tips for challenging growth

- Tell your child about people and ideas that have inspired you.
- Talk with your child about the positive things he or she has to look forward to in the future.
- Expect your child to do her or his best, even when doing something he or she doesn't like.
- Help your child find her or his own solutions rather than just telling him or her what to do.
- Challenge your child to try things that are a little hard for him or her.
- Tell your child about a person who really inspires you now or one who did in the past. If possible, introduce your child to that person.
- Teach your child that making mistakes is part of learning.
- Praise your child for working hard and sticking to tasks even if he or she does not get the right answer or win the competition.
- Require your child to take responsibility if he or she does something wrong.

Relationship builder 5: Letter to the future

Sit down and write a letter to your child as if it is 20 years in the future and he or she is living a good life.. Make the letter interesting and informal and even funny if possible.

Your objective is to convey to your child that he or she has an exciting and important future to look forward to and that you have high expectations and hopes for him or her in many areas of life.

Relationship builder 6: Listing limits

Use this activity to see your family's rules and limits through the eyes of your child. Without reminding your child about family rules, ask your child to talk about or write down the behaviors that he or she thinks are not acceptable in your family.

After your child has completed his or her list, talk about the behaviors he or she listed. Then add to the list any that you think are important but that your child did not include. Ask your child why she or he thinks your family has those limits or rules.

Talk about the role of limits in our lives. They may keep us from doing things we want to do, but they also keep everyone safe and help people live together more peacefully and happily.

Relationship builder 7: Ready or not?

Sit down with your child and make a list of the things that you don't allow him or her to do at the her or his current age, such as piercing ears, going on a date, staying out late, or seeing certain movies. Once you have a list that captures things that are important to you and your child, ask your child to say or write down the ages at which he or she should be allowed to do each thing.

After your child has completed the list, discuss the ages at which you think it will be acceptable to do the activities. Explore why it is important for young people to have limits in their lives and why getting older comes with new opportunities and new responsibilities. If there are areas where your child wants more freedom, talk about what would be needed for you to be comfortable with renegotiating certain limits based on increased responsibility.

Relationship builder 8: Who has gone before?

With your child, collect photos, videos, documents, and other artifacts to create a family timeline about the history of your family. Ask your child for ideas of things to put in the timeline. Point out things that you can be proud of, including both accomplishments and obstacles that were overcome. Ask your child what aspect of this family history she or he is most curious about or proud of. Emphasize that your child is part of this proud history and that she or he has the opportunity to contribute to it by living a positive life today and in the future.

Relationship builder 9: Proudest moment

Talk with your child about times that he or she has been proud of something they achieved. This thing can be something your child achieved without help or that he or she did with assistance. Write down a word or phrase to summarize each time your child has felt proud. Then look over the list and ask your child if one time stands out as his or her single proudest moment in life so far.

Talk about what made that such a proud moment and what it might say about your child's interests and talents and future. In the coming days and weeks, find other ways to help your child feel a similar sense of pride in what he or she has accomplished.

Provide support

"I've made it my goal that I will be there 150% for her, no matter what. I don't care what we have to go through, we'll be there. You know? I'll give her the shirt off my back to show her that she's always got us."

An important way families stick together is helping each other in practical ways to stay on track to learn, grow, complete tasks, and achieve goals. The following activities focus on this kind of support.

Tips for providing support

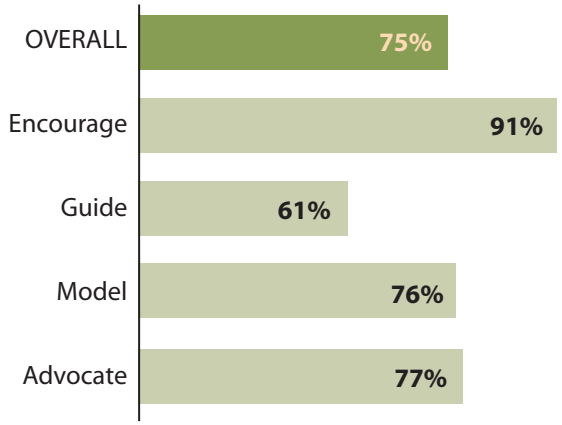
- Praise your child for her or his hard work, whether he or she succeeds or fails.
- Encourage your child to try new things he or she might be interested in. If your child is afraid to try something new because she or he is worried it might be too hard, explain that everyone has to start somewhere. Tell your child that if he or she tries something challenging and it doesn't go well, it doesn't mean he or she failed. It is just an opportunity to try again and get better.
- When you teach your child a skill, demonstrate it by breaking it into smaller steps.
- Model the values, attitudes, and behaviors you want your child to follow.
- Talk with your child about the need to do some things that you don't want to do in order to be able to do the things you do want to do. Share stories of things you do that you didn't (or don't) enjoy but that you did to enable you to achieve other goals that were important to you.
- When your child is not getting the help he or she needs from another adult, talk to the person and try to find a solution.

Relationship builder 10: Help reach a goal

Help your child select a goal that she or he wants to achieve and that you are going to work together to accomplish. Select an intermediate goal that will take weeks (not days

Provide support: Parents' perspectives

Parenting adults who report strength in each action that provides support in their relationship with their child.



Based on a Search Institute survey of 1,085 U.S. parents with children ages 3 to 13.

or years) to complete. It could involve schoolwork or a favorite activity, but it needs to be a goal your child has, not just one that you want him or her to achieve.

Work with your child to brainstorm the benefits of achieving the goal. Then brainstorm obstacles to achieving it. (Studies have shown that identifying both the benefits and the obstacles at the same time makes it more likely the goal will be achieved.) Then help your child think of ways to remove the obstacles if and when they are encountered.

Finally, help your son or daughter break the goal down into smaller steps that will lead toward the larger goal. Help your child set a date for reaching the goal. While your child is working to achieve the goal, check in regularly to see how things are going.

If your child reaches the goal, celebrate the accomplishment and ask your child to think about why he or she succeeded. If your child did not achieve the objective, celebrate the effort and discuss what he or she could do differently in the future to increase the chances of successfully completing goals.

Whether your child reached the goal or not, ask her or him to share what they learned, enjoyed, or found most interesting as they were working on their goal.

Relationship builder 11: Do what's right

Tell your child about a time in your life when you did what you believed was right even if others disagreed or you had to pay a price for what you did. Ask your child if he or she ever feels pressure to do things that don't feel right. If the answer is yes, ask for an example and discuss it together. Talk about the importance of standing up for what is right and encourage your child to talk with you if she or he ever feels pressure not to do the right thing.

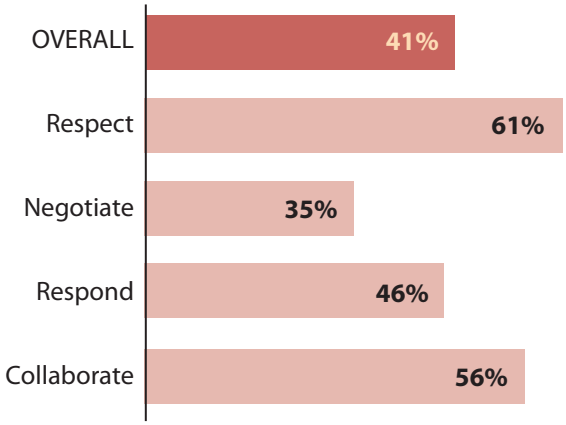
Relationship builder 12: Stand up for me

Ask your child if there is a time or a place in his or her life where he or she doesn't feel safe or feels she or he is being treated unfairly. If your child answers that there is such a time or place, talk about things your child could do to deal with the situation. Also talk to relevant adults in that situation to attempt to understand and resolve the issue.

After you have done that, let your child know you took steps to address the concern. Even if you aren't successful, it is important your child knows you made the effort.

Share power: Parents' perspectives

Percentage of parenting adults who report strength in each action that shares power in their relationship with their child.



Based on a Search Institute survey of 1,085 U.S. parents with children ages 3 to 13.

Share power

"Respect them. And expect them to respect you in return."

Relationships involve a give and take. Kids learn and grow when they have a voice in the family and are part of making decisions that affect them. How we share power—how that changes as our kids grow up—prepares them to be responsible, contributing adults. The following activities examine how you share power in your family.

Tips for sharing power

- Respect your child's opinions, even when you disagree.
- When you're in a disagreement, take time to understand each other's point of view.
- Be open to changing your opinions on important topics based on what you learn from your child.
- When your child doesn't understand what you're trying to teach, try to show her or him in a different way.
- Create something new together that neither of you has done before. Options could include devising a

new recipe, building something, painting a picture, or creating a piece of music.
- Develop new interests based on things you learn from your child.
- The next time your child comes to you about a large or small problem, don't provide the answers or solve the problem. Instead, say something like, "Let's see what you can do," and then ask your child find solution with your guidance.
- Respect one another's point of view, even if you disagree.

Relationship builder 13: Listen first

When your child gets upset about something or when he or she has done something wrong, listen carefully and let your child know that you understand his or her feelings before you respond. Use words such as "It sounds like you feel that . . . " and then do your best to describe how your child is feeling in order to let him or her know that you understand your child's perspective even if you don't agree with it. Communicate that you understand and care about how the child feels even if you believe that he or she needs to make different decisions in the future.

Relationship builder 14: You choose

Find a time when you need or want your child to make a decision and then provide him or her with several distinct options to choose from. Provide your child with at least two options, but not so many options that your son or daughter will struggle to choose among them. For example, offer four books from which your child can choose two bedtime stories, or offer several snacks from which they can choose one.

To the greatest extent possible, let your child make the decision without interference, although you can provide guidance on which option might be the best one from your perspective. If your child chooses an option different from the one you advised or that you would have chosen, you can mention that to your child, but let the child make the final decision.

Relationship builder 15: Family meeting

Hold a family meeting to discuss issues that are important to each member of the family. Let your child(ren) help determine the agenda for the meeting. Include as many kid-suggested items as possible on the agenda so that the young people feel that their ideas and priorities truly matter in the family. Write and print the meeting agenda in advance so that children will see their ideas included on a printed and official agenda. When you come to those items during the meeting, be sure to let your child express whatever ideas and opinions he or she considers important before you provide an adult perspective.

Relationship builder 16: Time together

Select a single day or an entire vacation and let your child help plan what you will do. Invite your child to suggest ideas for the day or the trip before you suggest any of your own. Do as many of your child's ideas as possible. As you move through the day or the vacation, celebrate your child's choices and thank him or her for the good ideas. If your child struggles to think of enough or any activities, provide him or her with several ideas to get started and ask him or her to choose one.

Relationship builder 17: Teach something

Ask your child to teach you how to do something that you currently do not know how to do. For example, a young child could draw a tower or build one out of Legos. An older child could play a song on a musical instrument or demonstrate videogame skills.

Pay close attention while your child does the teaching and ask your child questions that allow him or her to demonstrate their expertise. After your child has finished teaching, ask her or him how it felt. Encourage your child to share what he or she knows and can do with others in the future.

Expand possibility

"I believe in him just as much as he believes in me. So I try to support him by being interested in what he likes, and trying it out."

We help each other grow in our families when we look beyond what we already know and imagine new possibilities in the future. This involves trying new things,

going new places, and meeting people. Try the following activities.

Tips for expanding possibility

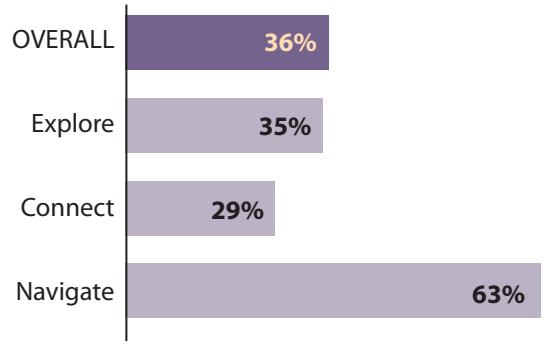
- Show your child how to ask for help when he or she needs it and then help your child practice that skill. For example, when he or she wants something in a restaurant or store, help your child ask a waiter or clerk for help rather than doing it for your child.
- Do a volunteer service activity together. Ask your child for ideas of causes or places where he or she would like to volunteer.
- Find opportunities for your child to spend time with people who are different from your family.
- Introduce your child to new music, art, or activities.
- Introduce your child to other trustworthy adults who have a hobby or interest that your child shares.

Relationship builder 18: Map relationships

Encourage your child to think about the people he or she interacts with at home, in your extended family, at school, in afterschool programs, in the community, and in other places where he or she spends time. Invite them to think about both adults and other kids.

Expand possibility: Parents' perspectives

Percentage of parenting adults who report strength in each action that expand possibility in their relationship with their child.



Based on a Search Institute survey of 1,085 U.S. parents with children ages 3 to 13.

More specifically, ask your child the following questions: (1) Who do you think really cares about you? (2) Who tells you that you should work on things to do them better? (3) Who helps you do things? (4) Who really listens to you and who sometimes lets you decide things for yourself? (5) Who tells you about new things, takes you to new places, and introduces you to new people?

Take brief notes during the conversation so you have a record of your child's responses. Share the notes with your child afterwards, then keep them for future reference. If your child names people you don't know, ask questions to learn more about them. If there is an area of your child's life (i.e. school) in which he or she does not experience one or more of the five essential actions that define a developmental relationship, talk about ways that he or she might make new connections in those environments. You may want to reach out to adults in those environments to encourage them to help your child build developmental relationships.

Relationship builder 19: Different from us

Introduce your child to a person, a family, or a community or an organization that comes from a culture different from yours. You can visit community festivals, restaurants, and museums to expand your child's perspective. Explain that meeting people who are different from us can make life more interesting and helps us get along better with others in our world. Discuss ways that this new culture is similar and ways that it is different from your own.

Relationship builder 20: Scavenger hunt

Visit a museum or a similar organization without your children and find interesting things for them to see and do there. While you are there, plan a scavenger hunt that the children will lead on a later visit. Give your child clues to find the things in the museum. Whatever they find, celebrate the hunt and ask your child what she or he thought about the "treasures" they found. Find a creative way to celebrate your child's participation in the scavenger hunt and the results—whatever they might be.

Display 33

Tracking Your Family's Experiences with Relationship Builder Activities

Use this checklist to keep track of the Relationship Builder activities you try. Put a checkmark by those you try. Make a note about what you learned from the activity—or what you'd do differently the next time.

	Relationship Builder Activity	Tried It	How Did It Go?
Express Care	1. Unplug and focus	❑	
	2. Say they matter most	❑	
	3. Surface strengths	❑	
	4. What's valuable to you?	❑	
Challenge Growth	5. Letters to the future	❑	
	6. Listing limits	❑	
	7. Ready or not	❑	
	8. Who has gone before?	❑	
	9. Proudest moment	❑	
Provide Support	10. Help reach a goal	❑	
	11. Do what's right	❑	
	12. Stand up for me	❑	
Share Power	13. Listen first	❑	
	14. You choose	❑	
	15. Family meeting	❑	
	16. Time together	❑	
	17. Teach something	❑	
Expand Possibility	18. Map relationships	❑	
	19. Different from us	❑	
	20. Scavenger hunt	❑	

Postscript: Developmental Relationships—Fuel for Life

This study introduces the first national survey based on Search Institute's framework of developmental relationships. It focuses on parenting adults' perceptions of their relationships with their children, ages 3 to 13. In doing so, it significantly expands our understanding of the characteristics and consequences of developmental relationships in families with children through elementary school.

The evidence described in this report reinforces our view that helping parenting adults build developmental relationships with their children is a potentially powerful for helping all children succeed in school and in life. The approach to family engagement advocated here differs in important ways from more traditional and widely used approaches, such as involving parents in governing schools, helping with homework, or fundraising for and organizing youth programs.

Building developmental relationships with their children is something parents want to do and are uniquely able to do. Schools, youth programs, and communities can support them in this central role. In the years ahead, Search Institute will help to advance this new vision for family engagement through additional studies and through the creation of practical tools and techniques. We invite other researchers, practitioners, and especially parents to join with us in that effort.

As we work to deepen our understanding of parent-child relationships, we will also launch studies to understand other relationships that matter in young people's lives, including relationships with teachers, coaches, mentors, and peers, to name a few. Our ultimate objective is to increase understanding the web of developmental relationships across the different parts of young people's lives—and how those relationships uniquely and collectively shape young people's development.

Not relationships alone

In embarking on this research and improvement agenda, we recognize that, by themselves, developmental relationships will not put young people on the path to thrive—especially those young people who face poverty, racism, discrimination, and other inequities and structural barriers to success. Continuing work to reduce and ultimately eliminate those obstacles is essential. In addition, helping children thrive depends on factors such as quality programs and schools; opportunities to learn, explore, and stretch outside of school; and other resources.

Tapping untapped power

At the same time, this research joins a growing body of evidence that shows the powerful role of relationships and social capital in building community and addressing inequities in society. This research reinforces the call for strengthening the developmental and relational infrastructure while also working to counteract pervasive structural injustices.

The good news is that a rich, but perhaps untapped, reservoir of relational power exists across the economic and cultural spectrum in the United States. That power has been critical for pulling many people through difficult and trying times. In innumerable instances, relational power has been a catalyst for change. It already plays a central role in young people's lives, and it has the potential to be even more transformative in addressing the challenges young people face. That power lies in the families and other places where children and youth live and grow.

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