Research Spotlight

DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

OCTOBER 2017

Pathways
to Education

Pathways
to Education

About Pathways to Education Canada

Pathways to Education is a national, charitable organization breaking the cycle of poverty through education. Its award-winning program is creating positive social change by supporting youth living in low-income communities to overcome barriers to education, graduate from high school, and build the foundation for a successful future. Through the collective power of partnerships, Pathways to Education's innovative program is preparing youth for tomorrow.

Suggested Citation:

Glogowski, K., & Brown, L. (2017). Intentional Self-Regulation: Research Spotlight. Toronto: Pathways to Education Canada.

Pathways to Education Research Spotlights explore specific topics in the field of Positive Youth Development by presenting current, evidence-based knowledge in a plain-language summary.

Intended Audience

The Spotlights are designed for professionals who directly contribute to the well-being and development of youth. This includes those who work directly with youth, such as mentors, educators, child and youth workers, youth program front-line staff, and social workers, as well as those who work indirectly with or for youth: youth mentoring program managers or youth researchers. These Spotlights can also be helpful to parents or non-parental adults, such as aunts, uncles, neighbours, community leaders, and other informal mentors.

Methodology

This Research Spotlight draws on a literature review of relevant peer-reviewed, English journal articles in ERIC, PSYCInfo, and Google Scholar. We focused on studies published within the past 10 years, however we also considered earlier foundational publications, in addition to grey literature. The primary search terms employed were: self-regulation, self-control, intentional self-regulation, and selection optimization and compensation.

This research was compiled through the lens of focusing on youth living in situations of risk and disadvantage, and so the information gathered has been presented to apply to that population. It is particularly relevant to those of a high school age, approximately age 13-18.

Developmental Relationships

This Spotlight focuses on developmental relationships, often defined as relationships where someone actively helps another person to develop (Rock & Garavan, 2006). It is meant to be useful for adults who are interested in building close relationships with youth in order to help them develop.

Developmental relationships are important because they are crucial for positive development. In fact, according to researchers Li and Julian (2012), "...the effectiveness of child-serving programs, practices, and policies is determined first and foremost by whether they strengthen or weaken developmental relationships." (p. 157). Developmental relationships are especially valuable for youth who lack supportive parents or other adults in their lives, and who live in low socioeconomic contexts where programs and support for youth may be scarce and social capital limited.

WHAT
What are developmental relationships?

- Developmental relationships are "relationships where an individual [the developer] takes an active interest in and initiates actions to advance the development of another [the protégé]" (Rock & Garavan, 2006, p. 330). They can occur in either a one-on-one or a group context (Li & Julian, 2012).
- Developmental relationships are a general category of relationships, which include formal relationships (such as mentoring, coaching, teaching, or therapy), and informal relationships (eg. between peers, neighbours, cousins, siblings, etc.) (Rock & Garavan, 2006).
- The Search Institute proposes that relationships are developmental when they help young people to: discover who they are, develop abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017).
- Youth should have several developmental relationships in their lives, as one developmental relationship likely cannot provide them with everything they need (Janssen, Van Vuuren, & De Jong, 2012).
- The supportive web of all the developmental relationships that a person has at one time has been referred to as a developmental network. (Rock & Garavan, 2006; Janssen, Van Vuuren, & De Jong, 2012). These various relationships provide youth with different types and intensities of support (Centre for Promise, 2015).
- Over the past several years, research has begun to focus more on developmental networks rather than individual developmental relationships (Janssen, Van Vuuren, & De Jong, 2012).
- Ideally, youth have at least three to five 'anchor relationships'– strong, stable relationships that act as an anchor in their lives, in addition to a web of other supportive relationships. An anchor relationship can act as a gateway for the youth to access their

broader network of other supportive relationships (Centre for Promise, 2015; Roehlkepartain et al., 2017).

WHY
Why are developmental relationships important?

- Relationships are crucial to human development. Developmental relationships can be thought of as the 'active ingredient' across all programs and interventions which help youth (Li and Julian, 2012).
- A team of American and Russian researchers demonstrated the power of developmental relationships in the context of Russian orphanages. Initially, the orphanages had abhorrent conditions– there were large groups of children with only a few staff, limiting the amount of time spent with each child. Caring for the children involved a lot of control and a lack of affection, meaning that emotional attachments essentially could not occur. The researchers implemented changes such as creating smaller family-like groups and training the staff to be more affectionate, sensitive and responsive to the children's needs. This enabled developmental relationships to form, which led to large improvements in all areas of development: physical growth (height, weight, and head circumference), motor development, social-emotional skills, and cognitive abilities. This was solely the result of developmental relationships as they did not change the children's nutrition or medical care (Li and Julian, 2012; The St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team, 2008).
- The more developmental relationships a youth has, the stronger their resiliency, academic motivation, socio-emotional skills, and sense of responsibility, and the less they engage in high-risk behaviours (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017).
- Having a network of meaningful relationships is more predictive of mortality than many lifestyle behaviours, such as smoking or exercise (Holt-Lunstad & Smith, 2012)

Feeney and Collins' model of thriving through relationships (2014):

- This model explains how optimal relationships lead to maximized well-being (i.e. thriving).
- Relationships are valuable in two ways:
  1. They can buffer people from the detriments of adversity.
  2. They can maximize profiting from life opportunities.
- In these two ways, strong relationships influence several core aspects of people, such as their:
  - Emotional states: decreasing negative emotions and increasing positive ones.
  - Self-evaluations and self-perceptions: increased self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-acceptance, and self-compassion.
  - Appraisals of situations or events: viewing problems as manageable; expecting to accomplish goals.
  - Motivational states: being motivated to leave comfort zone; not settling for good enough; making changes in life; persevering.
  - Situation-relevant behaviours, resources, and outcomes: improving coping strategies and self-regulation; learning from experiences; making progress on goals.
  - Relational outcomes, attitudes, and expectations: feeling accepted, loved and cared for despite vulnerabilities; feeling valued and respected by others; forming new social connections.
  - Neural activation and physiological functioning: Deactivation of neural areas associated with threat; increased activation of reward-related neural areas associated with safety, reward, positive affect, decision making, dopamine release; adaptive immune, endocrine and cardiovascular functioning; release of neuropeptides involved in social bonding; increases in anabolic processes (increases in bone and muscle mass).
  - Health and lifestyle behaviours: improved diet and sleep quality; increased physical and mental activity; more self-care activities.
- Through these pathways, relationships determine people's well-being across various domains:
  - Hedonistic: Overall happiness and life satisfaction.

- Eudaimonic: Having a sense of purpose and meaning, working towards meaningful goals, personal growth.
- Psychological: Healthy self-esteem, resilience, optimism, and absence or reduced levels of mental health issues.
- Social: Strong relationships, having faith in others.
- Physical: Physical fitness, longevity, absence or reduced levels of illness.
- Therefore, relationships are one of the most important factors (possibly the most important factor) in a person's well-being. The more developmental relationships a youth has, the more likely they are to succeed in various areas of life.

HOW
How do you build developmental relationships with youth?

The following two models offer guidance on how to build developmental relationships and the core elements of successful developmental relationships:

The Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017)

- This practical framework lists five elements of strong developmental relationships, including specific actions which someone working with youth should do in order to maximize the youth's positive development.
  1. Express Care: Ensure that the protégé knows that they matter to the developer by being dependable, listening, believing in them, and being warm and encouraging.
  2. Challenge Growth: Push the protégé to keep improving by expecting their best, pushing them to go further, holding them accountable, and helping them learn from failures.
  3. Provide Support: Help the youth to complete tasks and achieve goals by helping them navigate challenges, empowering them, advocating for them, and setting boundaries.
  4. Share Power: Treat the protégé with respect and give them

a say by taking them seriously, including them in decisions that affect them, collaborating with them, and letting them lead.
5. Expand Possibilities: Connect the youth with people and places that broaden their world by inspiring them, exposing them to new things, and introducing them to people that can help them thrive.

Li and Julian's Developmental Relationship Model (2012)

- This theoretical model describes the core elements of developmental relationships. It was originally described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as being for a one-on-one relationship, but was expanded by Li and Julian (2012) to apply to group relationships as well.
- It states that strong developmental relationships have four defining characteristics:
  Attachment: The long-lasting emotional closeness which acts as a foundation for the relationship (Li & Julian, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
  Reciprocity: Both people are engaged in interacting together. In other words, there is a sustained and frequent reciprocal engagement in joint activities. For example, a mentor and mentee meet weekly to play sports (Li & Julian, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
  Progressive Complexity: The reciprocal activity or activities become gradually more challenging. The developer supports the youth to improve their capabilities by modelling and helping (i.e., scaffolding). As the youth learns the developer tailors their level of support accordingly, while continuously guiding them to improve (i.e., fading) (Brown, Collins, & Duguild, 1989; Li & Julian, 2012). For example, a parent helping a baby to walk may at first support their whole body, then just their hands, and eventually encourage them from a distance (Li & Julian, 2012).
  Balance of Power: Refers to the extent to which one participant in a developmental relationship dominates another (Li & Julian, 2012). Ideally there is a gradual shift in power towards the developing person (Li & Julian, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As the relationship progresses, the protégé becomes more able and willing to exert independence and control (Li & Julian, 2012). For instance, a mentee begins to choose what sort of activities to do with their mentor, rather than the mentor setting the agenda.
- These four characteristics are not separate like items on a checklist, but rather are interrelated and dependent upon one

another (Li & Julian, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- In order for developers to build optimal developmental relationships, they must ensure those elements are present (Li & Julian, 2012).

SO WHAT
How does this relate to youth living in contexts of risk?

- Youth living in situations of risk and disadvantage are often the youth who are most in need of developmental relationships, as they are less connected to a network of supportive adults (Smith, Newman-Thomas, & Stormont, 2015).
- Despite this need, unfortunately these youth can have more difficulty than other youth in establishing close, caring, relationships with supportive adults. This can be due to the youth having characteristics such as social skills deficits, difficulties trusting others, or low self-esteem (Smith, Newman-Thomas, & Stormont, 2015).
- An example of the value of developmental relationships for youth living in situations of risk and disadvantage: Researchers differentiated between two types of mentor-youth relationships with these youth: prescriptive relationships and developmental relationships. In prescriptive relationships, the mentors are controlling and unresponsive to the mentees' needs and preferences. These relationships lack positive impact. However in developmental relationships, the mentors invite mentees to help choose activities, and respond flexibly to the mentee's needs and developmental level. These relationships are far more successful, leading to the mentees' individual development and growth (Li & Julian, 2012; Morrow and Styles, 1995).
- Essentially, "...developmental relationships constitute the active ingredient of effective interventions serving at-risk children and youth across settings." (Li & Julian, 2012, p. 157).
- There are five functional roles that relationships with important non-family adults can provide– the adult can act as a supporter, a compass, a model, a connector, and/or a challenger for youth who need additional support (Hamilton, Hamilton, DuBois, & Sellers, 2016).

Conclusion

- Developmental relationships are relationships in which someone helps another person to grow and develop.
- Developmental relationships are important because they are crucial in human development and well-being.
- The two primary models of developmental relationships inform how to build developmental relationships. The Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017) recommends that developers express care, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities, for their protégé. This was partially based on Li and Julian's model (2012), which highlights attachment, reciprocity, progressive complexity, and balance of power as necessary elements of successful developmental relationships.
- Developmental relationships are especially relevant to youth living in situations of risk and disadvantage, who often have a higher need for connection, yet are less able to connect.

References

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). Interpersonal Structures as Contexts for Human Development. In Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design (pp. 56–82). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brown, Collins, & Duguild (1989). Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning. Educational Researcher, 18(1).

Centre for Promise: America's Promise Alliance. (2015). Don't Quit On Me: What Young People Who Left School Say About the Power of Relationships.

Feeney, B. C., & Collins, N. L. (2014). A new look at social support: A theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 19(2), 113–147.

Hamilton, M. A., Hamilton, S. F., DuBois, D. L., & Sellers, D. E. (2016). Functional Roles of Important Non-Family Adults For Youth. Journal of Community Psychology, 44(6), 799–806.

Holt-Lunstad, J., & Smith, T. B. (2012). Social relationships and mortality. Social & Personality Psychology Compass, 6, 41-53.

Janssen, S., Van Vuuren, M., & De Jong, M. (2012). Identifying support functions in developmental relationships: A self-determination perspective. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 82(1), 20–29.

Rock, A. D., & Garavan, T. N. (2006). Reconceptualizing Developmental Relationships. Human Resource Development Review, 5(3), 330–354.

Roehlkepartain, E., Pekel, K., Syvertsen, A., Sethi, J., Sullivan, T., & Scales, P. (2017). Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive. The Search Institute.

The St. Petersburg–USA Orphanage Research Team. (2008). The effects of early social-emotional and relationship experience on the development of young orphanage children. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 73(3), 1–297.

Li, J., & Julian, M. M. (2012). Developmental relationships as the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of "what works" across intervention settings. The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 82(2), 157.

Morrow, K. V., & Styles, M. B. (1995). Building relationships with youth in program settings: A study of Big Brothers/ Big Sisters. Philadelphia, PA: Public / Private Ventures.

Smith, C. A., Newman-Thomas, C., & Stormont, M. (2015). Long-Term Mentors' Perceptions of Building Mentoring Relationships with At-Risk Youth. Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning.

Pathways
to Education

twitter.com/**PathwaysCanada**

facebook.com/**PathwaysToEducationCanada**

instagram.com/**PathwaysCanada**

flickr.com/**PathwaysToEducation**

youtube.com/**GraduationNation**

pathwaystoeducation.ca