

*To be effective, adults working in afterschool settings must be able to engage youth in growth-promoting relationships. This chapter describes four core components of productive adult–youth relationships.*

# 4

---

## Growth-promoting relationships with children and youth

*Renée Spencer, Jean E. Rhodes*

AFTERSCHOOL SETTINGS REPRESENT fertile ground for the formation of strong intergenerational ties. The staff who work in such settings are afforded unique opportunities to provide a safe, informal context for support and guidance. Beyond emotional support, the adults who work in community programs are often prepared to provide tutoring, educational guidance, athletic, musical, or digital media coaching and instruction, and advice about how to navigate and avoid dangerous or violent situations. In that sense, afterschool staff may have important advantages over other nonparental adults in youth's lives such as volunteer mentors assigned to youth through programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters. Youth tend to see afterschool staff with far greater regularity and thus have increased opportunities for relationship formation and spontaneous disclosure. They also have access to a wider swath of the young person's life, including youth's daily interactions with their parents, program staff, and, especially, peers. As such, they may be better positioned to offer credible advice and real-time correctives.

Additionally, youth in afterschool settings are provided with the opportunity to observe adults in action and gravitate toward those with whom they feel the strongest affinity. This sort of youth-initiated mentoring has been shown to be more enduring than formally assigned mentoring relationships.<sup>1</sup> By the same token, adults have the opportunities to work with multiple youth and, at a setting level, provide what Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois have termed “collective mentoring” (p. 14).<sup>2</sup> When staff successfully coordinate and share responsibility for providing support to individual youth, the burden on any one staff member is reduced and youth’s opportunities for caring relationships expand. As Hirsch and colleagues observed, “many youth form emotionally close ties to multiple staff who, in differing and often complementary ways, provide the guidance, empowerment, and support for navigating the tumult of adolescents in often unforgiving environments” (p. 14).<sup>3</sup>

Since youth’s perceptions of the adults and their experiences interacting with them often determine both attendance and outcomes, adults serving in afterschool settings need to be highly skilled at developing growth-promoting relationships.<sup>4</sup> Achieving this, however, is no small feat in light of the myriad factors that influence such interactions. Here we identify cross-cutting qualities of growth-promoting relationships between youth and adults in the afterschool context, drawing from the theoretical and empirical work on afterschool settings as well as that on parent–child, teacher–child, and psychotherapy relationships. We take a relational view of adult–youth interactions and contend that staff must be equipped to engage in interactions that: build warm and emotionally supportive connections, provide developmentally appropriate structure and support, cultivate and respond to youth initiative, and scaffold and propel youth learning and skill development. These four relational processes transcend program structure and type. They are critical in all youth-serving programs, whether the structure is largely set by the adults, as in sports or theater arts activities, or more jointly negotiated, as in youth-empowerment and community-change initiatives.

---

***Build warm and supportive emotional connections***

Although it is widely recognized that the nature and quality of youth's emotional connections with adults are among the most important factors for fostering positive socioemotional and academic functioning, how adults foster such connections in after-school settings is less well understood.<sup>5</sup> Research on other forms of growth-fostering relationships, namely parenting, psychotherapy, and student–teacher relationships, has established that children need warm and supportive emotional connections to explore, grow, and learn.<sup>6</sup> This is vividly evident in very young children, but research on attachment indicates that these needs persist throughout childhood and into adolescence.<sup>7</sup> Young people of all ages need important adults in their lives to provide secure bases on which they can rely as they take risks and embark on new challenges in their ever-widening worlds.

What are the features of warm and emotionally supportive relationships? Consistency and predictability are critical as are authenticity, empathy, and positive regard.<sup>8</sup> Youth must be able to rely on the adults in afterschool settings to do what they say they are going to do and to be predictable in their behaviors. Genuine engagement on the part of the adult can facilitate feelings of trust by giving young people the sense that they know the adult. Empathy, which can be thought of most simply as the ability and willingness to understand the feelings and perspectives of another person as well as taking responsive action, has been linked with better outcomes in psychotherapy through its role in facilitating feelings of safety, encouraging self-disclosure, and activating the client's own self-healing capacities.<sup>9</sup> Positive regard, or warm acceptance without conditions, communicates to young people that they are of worth and that their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and ideas matter.<sup>10</sup> Positive regard may be critical in working across racial differences, providing reassurance to youth of color that they are being viewed as individuals and not through the lens of negative stereotypes.<sup>11</sup> Together, these relational processes can facilitate the development of

warm emotional connections by demonstrating the predictability and emotional availability of the adult and by making the youth feel understood, accepted, and valued.

Youth who experience program staff as empathic, authentic, and who feel that these adults view them favorably may be more open to assistance that is offered and perhaps also more likely to seek out or ask for assistance or guidance. Youth who have a history of conflicted relationships with adults, and who may have given up hope that adult assistance can be of value to them, may become more willing to accept such assistance when provided in the context of a trusting, caring, and collaborative relationship. For others, a trusted adult may encourage the development and fostering of new interests. Afterschool program staff with these relational capacities may also be better able to manage the inevitable miscommunications and misunderstandings that arise in any interpersonal relationship, viewing them as opportunities to increase their understanding of the youth in ways that strengthen relationships.

---

### ***Provide developmentally appropriate structure and support***

As noted above, a significant strength of the afterschool context is the opportunity to engage youth in a wide range of activities, many of which are far less structured and much more flexible than the formal school environment tends to be. However, the need for some amount of structure, even in the most open-ended programs, remains. The challenge for staff is in structuring programs in ways that facilitate the attainment of the program goals while also being responsive to the needs of the participants.

Larson and Walker direct our attention to the larger ecology of interactions and highlight how afterschool practitioners must attend to and manage the different and sometimes competing relationships and needs of people in the afterschool setting.<sup>12</sup> This calls for a particular form of practitioner expertise, and involves

appraising situations and considering the multiple interests and needs at stake, generating a range of response options from which to choose, and involving youth in the solutions. Developmental needs and capacities must also be taken into account, as what might work well with children in the early elementary school years will be quite different from the strategies needed to contend with the situations that arise in the later elementary and middle school years.

Effective program staff members foster youth ownership while also ensuring that the activities stay on track.<sup>13</sup> Even the most heavily youth-led initiatives need adult guidance. It is important that there be consistency and shared understanding of how youth and adults will collaborate within the program.<sup>14</sup>

---

### *Cultivate and support youth interests and initiative*

There has been great interest in youth-led and youth-empowerment programming in the afterschool context.<sup>15</sup> Afterschool staff can help recognize and capitalize both on youth's interests and focused attention.<sup>16</sup> Engagement in shared interests can help structure and deepen peer and adult relationships.<sup>17</sup> Palmquist and Crowley have noted that, even at very early ages, children can develop "islands of expertise" around particular topics and experience a sense of efficacy and identity by cultivating an interest that can be shared with and displayed to others (p. 784).<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Gee has described how shared interests can create "affinity spaces" which bring youth and adults together, creating a powerfully enabling learning environment with varying levels of knowledge and expertise (p. 216).<sup>19</sup> Shared interests can be a particularly important mechanism to engage young people who do not identify with dominant cultures of schooling.<sup>20</sup> A growing body of work in the learning sciences argues that interest-driven experiences of efficacy, capacities for self-regulation, and effective learning choices determine young people's capacity for lifelong learning and are associated with the avoidance of risk.<sup>21</sup>

Even in highly adult-driven activities, such as sports, school musicals, or other programs heavily focused on skill development, adults must pay attention to needs and interests of the youth by listening to and obtaining feedback from them. In the absence of this, youth tend to disengage and take less ownership for the process.<sup>22</sup>

---

### ***Scaffold and propel youth through skill development***

Afterschool programs offer youth a plethora of learning opportunities that can serve to promote youth development in multiple domains. Whether these learning opportunities arise from focusing on the acquisition and development of a particular skill or through engagement in social and recreational experiences, the afterschool setting provides an ongoing supply of everyday interactions with more skilled partners that promote the development of cognitive abilities.<sup>23</sup> As Hirsch observed, it is important for adults to remain attuned to opportunities for connection, even when youth seem engaged in unstructured activities, as “beneath the veneer of chaos lie ordered patterns that permit but bound youthful energy” (p. 35).<sup>24</sup> Among other things, these patterns illuminate how activities serve as a context for meaningful intergenerational conversations and identity development.

To fully capitalize on these opportunities for youth learning and skill development, however, adults must be *intentional* in their interactions with youth. Vygotsky described a “zone of proximal development” in which learning takes place: beyond what a child or adolescent can attain when problem solving independently but within the range of what he or she can do while working under adult guidance or with more capable peers (p. 84).<sup>25</sup> When children’s or adolescents’ interactions with adults stretch them into this zone, it can facilitate cognitive and intellectual growth. Through this type of collaborative learning, youth can also refine new thinking skills and become more receptive to adult values, advice, and perspectives.<sup>26</sup> For these developmental processes to occur, however, youth have

to be engaged and motivated to participate in the activities. At times this can be achieved by building on youth initiative, as discussed in the previous section. Truly effective program staff, however, not only support young people toward their self-identified goals, but at times also push and then guide them to stretch toward new paths that they might not initially choose for themselves but which will lead them toward healthier and more productive futures.<sup>27</sup>

---

### *Conclusions*

In sum, the most effective adult–youth relationships in afterschool settings are those that are emotionally engaged, responsive to youth initiative, and provide a balance of appropriate structure, challenge, and support to maximize learning and skill development. These processes are mutually influencing as a positive emotional connection with a caring adult can enhance feelings of trust and result in greater openness on the part of the youth to the adult’s influence, support, and guidance. Engaging in shared activities with positive, trusted adults can enhance emotional well-being and contribute to youth’s greater self-confidence and willingness to stretch and take risks. In turn, receiving effective support and guidance can deepen their emotional connection and feelings of trust. Adults who get to know the youth well and develop a sense of their individual capacities and interests can intentionally structure even more informal activities in ways that promote learning and the development of new skills.

Of course, program staff are not the only determinants of positive adult–youth interactions in the afterschool context. The youth’s interests, interpersonal styles and psychological and behavioral functioning, the program focus and structure, and the larger social ecologies within which each of the participants and the program itself are embedded are significant influences as well. However, program quality still ultimately depends in large part on the adults’ ability to skillfully navigate these complex mutually

influencing forces and build meaningful and productive relationships with the youth participants.

One major implication of this chapter is the need to train afterschool staff to be more mindful or “intentional” about their potential role as confidants and mentors to the youth in the setting. For staff to achieve such skills and competencies, programs should offer opportunities for professional development, including access to evidence-based training in relationship building and maintenance.<sup>28</sup> In the absence of an intentional approach and training in evidence-based practices, the potential of staff to forge meaningful connections with youth may not be fully realized. They may squander important “mentoring moments” and engage in practices that undermine youth’s confidence and willingness to disclose. Unfortunately, because mentoring is often seen as an important byproduct, but not central component of their roles in many settings, staff and content experts are rarely provided with in-depth training on how to forge strong, effective relationships. Although a range of web-based toolkits and training programs for afterschool staff have been introduced in recent years, most are focused on curriculum delivery as opposed to relationship building. Any training on relationship development should emphasize the “collective” nature of the mentoring in afterschool and identify ways that staff can work together and share the responsibility to address the relational and developmental needs of individual youth.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, it should consider strengthening youths’ capacity for making prosocial connections. This includes efforts to help youth identify additional prosocial, caring adults in their existing networks, such as teachers and coaches, and then to develop youths’ capacity for reaching out to others and for forming and maintaining connections.

Changes in families, work demands, and communities have left many children and adolescents bereft of the adult supports that were available just a few decades ago while presenting them with increasingly complex challenges. No one institution—whether families, schools, afterschool settings, or other positive youth

development programs—can completely compensate for the social isolation that many children and adolescents experience, and each institution is stretched by the limitations of the others. Developing and evaluating strategies that facilitate skillful, intentional relationship building both in and beyond afterschool settings can help raise the probability that youth will develop caring, productive relationships with the adults in their everyday lives.

### Notes

1. Schwartz, S. E., Rhodes, J. E., Spencer, R., & Grossman, J. B. (2013). Youth initiated mentoring: Investigating a new approach to working with vulnerable adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 52*(1–2), 155–169.

2. Hirsch, B. J., Deutsch, N. L., & DuBois, D. L. (2011). *After-school centers and youth development: Case studies of success and failure* (p. 14). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

3. Hirsch et al. (2011). p. 14.

4. Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

5. Eccles & Gootman (2002); Hirsch, B. J. (2005). *A place to call home: After-school programs for urban youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

6. Baumrind, D. (2005). Patterns of parental authority and adolescent autonomy. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 108*, 61–69; Shirk, S. R., Karver, M. S., & Brown, R. (2011). The alliance in child and adolescent psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy, 48*(1), 17–24; Sabol, T. J., & Pianta, R. C. (2012). Recent trends in research on teacher–child relationships. *Attachment & Human Development, 14*(3), 213–231.

7. Allen, J. P. (2008). The attachment system in adolescence. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed., pp. 419–435). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

8. Rogers, C. R. (1980). *A way of being*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

9. Bohart, A. C., Elliott, R., Greenberg, L., & Watson, J. C. (2002). Empathy. In J. C. Norcross (Ed.), *Psychotherapy relationships that work: Therapist contributions and responsiveness to patients* (pp. 89–108). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

10. Rogers (1980).

11. Cohen, G. L., & Steele, C. M. (2002). A barrier of mistrust: How negative stereotypes affect cross-race mentoring. In J. Aronson (Ed.), *Improving academic achievement: Impact of psychological factors on education* (pp. 303–327). New York, NY: Academic Press.

12. Larson, R. W., & Walker, K. C. (2010). Dilemmas of practice: Challenges to program quality encountered by youth program leaders. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*(3–4), 338–349.

13. Larson, R., Hansen, D., & Walker, K. (2005). Everybody's gotta give: Development of initiative and teamwork within a youth program. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, afterschool and community programs* (pp. 159–183). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
14. Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 57–74.
15. Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Developmental Science*, 8(2), 75–90.
16. Larson, R. W. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 170–183.
17. Ito, M., Gutierrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., ... Watkins, S. C. (2013). *Connected learning: An agenda for research and design* (A research synthesis report). Connected Learning Research Network, MacArthur Foundation.
18. Palmquist, S., & Crowley, K. (2007). From teachers to testers: How parents talk to novice and expert children in a natural history museum. *Science Education*, 91(5), 783–804.
19. Gee, J. P. (2005). Semiotic social spaces and affinity spaces. In D. Barton & K. Tusting (eds.), *Beyond communities of practice language power and social context* (pp. 214–232). New York, N. Y. Cambridge University Press.
20. Ito et al. (2013); Watkins, C. (2009). *The young and the digital: What the migration to social network sites, games, and anytime, anywhere media means for our future*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
21. Dawes, N. P., & Larson, R. (2011). How youth get engaged: Grounded-theory research on motivational development in organized youth programs. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(1), 259–269.; Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values, and goals. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 109–132.
22. Larson, Walker, & Pearce (2005).
23. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
24. Hirsch (2005). p. 35.
25. Vygotsky (1978).
26. Rogoff (1990).
27. Larson, R. (2006). Positive youth development, willful adolescents, and mentoring. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 34(6), 677–689.
28. Kupersmidt, J., & Rhodes, J. (2014). Mentor training. In D. L. DuBois & M. Karcher (Eds.), *The handbook of youth mentoring* (2nd ed., pp. 439–455). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
29. Hirsch et al. (2011).

RENÉE SPENCER *is an associate professor at the Boston University School of Social Work.*

JEAN E. RHODES *is the Frank L. Boyden Professor of Psychology and the director of the Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.*

---

## Commentary

*Tiffany Cooper Gueye*

RHODES AND SPENCER masterfully articulate the potential for impact, and enormous responsibility, in the unique youth–staff relationships developed in afterschool settings. The implications for practice are significant.

I had the privilege of beginning my career as a mentor in an afterschool program through BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life) 15 years ago. BELL, a national social enterprise, was started in 1992 with Harvard Law School students who were mentoring teenagers in their community. Today, BELL provides rigorous academic enrichment programs after school and during the summer in communities across the country. BELL serves youth aged five through fourteen who attend high-poverty, low-performing schools, and who are diverse in race, ethnicity, and English proficiency. Although BELL's school-based programs have been proven to help children perform better in literacy than a randomly assigned control group, BELL's ability to deliver curriculum effectively is centered on effective mentoring relationships among the young people and the afterschool staff hired to serve them.

In my time with BELL, I have come to recognize what Rhodes and Spencer's research makes clear—that putting passionate adults in front of high-risk children through consistent mentoring opportunities can have a powerful impact on the youth served. The implications of this research for afterschool practice are numerous. This work can inform how BELL and other organizations screen and select mentors, the content of training offered, the ongoing support and coaching of staff, and the creation of afterschool activities

with structure and alignment consistent with growth-promoting relationship principles.

Among the lessons we have learned in 20 years of work is that the quality of staff ensures program effectiveness in that (1) staff are in a position to develop and maintain positive relationships with youth, and (2) staff provide direction to organize programming that meets the interests of youth and facilitate their participation. We have found it effective to screen prospective mentors first based on their belief in children's potential, then on their prior work experience. This practice typically yields the level of passion and commitment that we have seen associated with strong outcomes for youth.

Also afforded to afterschool programs is the opportunity to hire a diverse staff of mentors. BELL staff offers much more diversity than other settings, like school, in terms of racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds—often mirroring the diversity of the youth served. This in turn facilitates another unique aspect of the afterschool staff role—that is, the ability to connect three spheres of a young person's life: school or academic, extracurricular interests, and home or family. When afterschool staff are removed from linguistic barriers, for example, they are more approachable by parents and serve to liaise between the school day and the home—often through daily contact. As a result, the afterschool staff have the opportunity to bring a more comprehensive understanding of the youth to their mentoring relationship. BELL's training includes a module on parent engagement in order to prepare staff for this aspect of their role.

Finally, the staff's role in directing the programming, even when highly prestructured by BELL, serves to drive and maintain participation of the youth over time. This sustained engagement is a necessary condition for achieving the positive academic and social outcomes we seek. Relatedly, retaining the staff over that same period of time protects the consistency of the mentoring relationship to avoid harm. At BELL, having a culture of

appreciation serves in part to retain staff within a year and keep them coming back year after year.

Rhodes and Spencer remind us of the extraordinary responsibility we have of getting these practices right.

TIFFANY COOPER GUEYE *is chief executive officer, Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL).*

Copyright of New Directions for Youth Development is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.