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Someone who ‘gets’ me: adolescents’ perceptions of positive regard from natural mentors

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ABSTRACT

A survey of 1,860 15-year-olds from across the United States found that mentees’ perceived positive regard from caring adults was associated with a range of personal, school, and civic outcomes. A structural equation modeling analysis found that for youth who have a mentor or other caring adults that they feel *gets them*, this perceived positive regard was positively related to youth’s sense of purpose and effort in school, which are related to higher grades and civic engagement. A person-centered approach found associations between feeling ‘*gotten*’ by a caring adult and higher academic and civic engagement. Results also demonstrate potential negative effects for youth who perceived low positive regard from an adult. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Positive regard; positive youth development; nonparent adults; attunement; opportunity

Adolescents who have adjusted well, despite stressors and difficulties, often attribute their success to a natural mentor such as a grandparent, teacher, or coach. Natural mentors are typically defined as caring, nonparent adults who provide youth with support and guidance (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). By definition, natural mentoring relationships emerge through organic social connections rather than formal mentoring programs. Researchers suggest that these naturally occurring relationships can have a powerful impact on youth development. Compared with their unmentored peers, youth with natural mentors experience better educational, vocational, and psychosocial outcomes during early adulthood (Ben-Eliyahu, Rhodes, & Scales, 2014; Hagler & Rhodes, 2018; McDonald & Lambert, 2014; Miranda-Chan, Fruht, Dubon, & Wray-Lake, 2016; Timpe & Lunkenheimer, 2015). Interestingly, however, studies have yielded widely varying rates of natural mentors, ranging from 37% to 75% of youth claiming to have an adult mentor (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Hamilton & Darling, 1989). This range may reflect actual variation but also could result from the ambiguity of the term. In studies of natural mentoring, youth are typically

asked to identify one or more mentors whom they admire and to whom they can go for support and guidance (e.g., DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1998; Hurd, Albright, Wittrup, Negrete, & Billingsley, 2018; Raposa, Erickson, Hagler, & Rhodes, 2018; Rhodes, Ebert, & Fischer, 1992). Adolescents may be unfamiliar with what a mentor is, associate mentoring only with formal programs, or feel that the everyday adults in their lives do not merit this somewhat lofty designation. Drawing on findings from a qualitative study, in which mentees described feeling that their mentor ‘understands or *gets them*, knows who they are, and cares about them’ (Spencer, 2006, p. 296), we focus on this notion of *getting* as an expanded form of intergenerational natural mentoring.

This focus—of the youth perceiving some indication of understanding and positive regard from the adult – is intriguing, as it shifts the perspective from youth’s admiration of adults to their appraisal of whether they feel that certain adults understand and like them, a core need throughout life (Trevarthen, 2001). In this study, we use the term *natural mentor* to describe a broad range of caring adults that youth feel, understand and appreciate them. In doing so, this expands the traditional definition of natural mentors to include adults whom youth might not specifically designate as their mentors but who nevertheless serve in that capacity. The overarching purpose of our study was to examine how adolescent mentees’ perceptions of an adult that *gets them* or understands them and is perceived to have positive regard, is related to their sense of purpose, school effort, civic engagement, and grades, and whether the strength of the perceived relational engagement shapes these associations.

Theoretical model

The conceptual model framing this study drew on Rhodes’ (2004) conceptual model of youth mentoring. According to this model, mentoring relationships that are mutually trusting and empathic lead to social-emotional and cognitive development and serve as role models for youth (Bowers, Wang, Tirrell, & Lerner, 2016; Rhodes, 2004). We built on this model and others that focus on a positive strengthening/empowering framework (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016) to include adults that youth identify as *getting them*, that is, youth identify the adult as someone who understands and likes them. In particular, experiencing positive regard from an adult was expected to be related to youth’s sense of purpose, effort, grades, and civic engagement. In this sense, positive regard was a mechanism through which adult-child relationships affected positive outcomes, as described below.

In his humanistic theories in psychotherapy, Carl Rogers underscored the importance of unconditional positive regard as one of the necessary and sufficient preconditions for any positive change (Farber, Suzuki, & Lynch, 2018; Rogers, 1957). Gottman and Gottman (2018) described positive regard as not

only noticing but expressing appreciation for another's positive attributes. Expressing positive regard becomes a habit of mind whereby one learns to scan the world for things to admire, be proud of, and appreciate, and this needs to be expressed. Thanking someone for doing something right builds a culture of appreciation and respect in the relationship (Gottman & Gottman, 2018). Mentors who *get* youth focus on and leverage their mentees' positive attributes, assets, and strengths (Lerner, Albers, Jelicic, & Smith, 2006). By contrast, judgmental mentors contribute to youth disengagement and termination (Spencer, 2007) and poorer outcomes (Karcher, Davidson, Rhodes, & Herrera, 2010). In a study of natural mentors, Hurd et al. (2018) found that positive appraisal of personal qualities and performance on tasks was associated with higher self-esteem and well-being in mentees from underrepresented groups.

A focus on perceived positive regard also makes sense from a developmental perspective. During the adolescent years, acceptance and rejection issues are particularly salient (Allen & Hauser, 1996; Luan et al., 2018). Cooley (1902), writing about the looking glass self, theorized that significant others become social mirrors into which adolescents look to form opinions of themselves. These opinions are then integrated into the adolescents' sense of self-worth. Mead (1934) and others built on this theory, suggesting that adolescents try to imagine how they are perceived from the perspective of significant others (Blumer, 1980). Thus, adolescents project themselves onto the role of their teachers and other caring adults, appraising situations and even themselves from the adults' standpoint. In this sense, adolescents' views of themselves are partially a reflected appraisal of others' judgments of them (Farber, Suzuki, & Lynch, 2019). Perceived positive regard is particularly important in the middle adolescent years, as individuals become more focused on identity development, more adept at abstract, complex, relativistic, and hypothetical thinking, and better able to evaluate relationships in terms of their alignment with notions of possible selves (Larson, 2011; Orth & Robins, 2019).

Moreover, as adolescents begin high school and gain greater autonomy from their parents, other adults take on increased importance as role models and alternative attachment figures (Allen & Hauser, 1996). Karcher et al. (2010) highlighted adolescents' sensitivity to nonparent adult appraisals. Adolescents who were paired with mentors who held more negative pre-match beliefs about youth in general showed fewer positive outcomes than those paired with mentors who were more positively disposed toward youth.

Although various relational processes have been shown to be important in conveying positive regard, youth may feel liked when adults are willing to take risks and be playful in their interactions (i.e., engaging in humorous, gentle teasing, and jokes; Baxter, 1992; Betcher, 1981; Glenn & Knapp, 1987). Playful communication has been found to serve many functions in close relationships, including conveying trust and affinity (Young & Cates, 2005). Such connections, particularly in the context of schools and communities, can lead students to be

more engaged in their academic work and, consequently, higher performing (Klem & Connell, 2004). Likewise, youth who feel liked and understood by the adults in their communities may sense a stronger commitment to and engagement with the issues in their communities (Lerner et al., 2006).

This more empathic, emotionally-attuned approach has been contrasted with some mentors' more instrumental styles, which are primarily built on goal-directed interactions, such as improving school performance or behavior (Darling, Hamilton, & Shaver, 2003). Although several researchers have compared the effects of youth-centered versus instrumental approaches (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1992; Lyons, McQuillin, & Henderson, 2019; Morrow & Styles, 1995), Karcher and Nakkula (2010) challenged the conception that these styles are mutually exclusive. Rather, they suggested, the styles are compatible, with each containing varying degrees of both relational and goal-directed interactions. As such, youth-centered and instrumental approaches represent distinct yet complementary dimensions of successful adult-youth relationships.

The current study

Data from the Teen Voice study (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011; Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, 2010) were used to explore youth's relationships with key adults outside of their families. The study included a measure of youth's relationships with adults who *get them*, conceptualized here as perceived positive regard within the context of natural mentoring relationships. More specifically, the first research question (RQ1) tested a conceptual model postulating that students who felt liked and understood by a caring adult would be more connected to their schools and communities through a sense of purpose and school effort (see Figure 1). This connection, in turn, was expected to lead to positive academic and civic outcomes, which is the focus of the second research question (RQ2). The third research question (RQ3) focused on a comparison of perceived positive regard from a caring adult with more traditional measures of

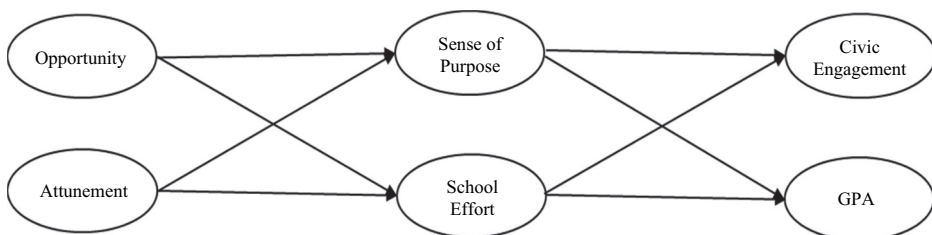


Figure 1. Conceptual model for the relations among perceived positive regard (opportunity & attunement), developmental assets (purpose & effort) and youth outcomes (civic engagement & GPA).

youth mentoring. The main hypothesis was that adolescents' perceptions of positive regard from a key adult would relate to a range of positive developmental outcomes, as shown in Figure 1. Finally, in the study we sought to investigate whether there were individual differences in the ways that components of perceived positive regard (i.e., attunement and opportunity) combine and whether individual differences in these elements are associated with different levels of purpose, effort, GPA, and civic engagement (research question four - RQ4).

Method

Research design

A cross-sectional survey research design was employed to survey a representative sample of American adolescents. Questionnaire data enabled a correlational examination of the association between mentees' perceived positive regard from an adult they consider a natural mentor or someone who *gets them*, with processes that support civic engagement and academic achievement (grade point average-GPA). In addition to these outcomes, youth were asked about their sense of purpose and school effort. This form of natural mentoring with an adult that *gets* the youth is contrasted with more formal mentoring relationships.

Purpose and research questions

The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether the presence of caring adults, whom mentees perceive as having positive regard or *getting them*, was associated with a range of personal, school, and civic outcomes, and whether these effects vary by the strength of mentee perceived relational engagement. To this end, four research questions were articulated:

- (1) Are components of perceived positive regard (i.e., attunement and opportunity) related to adolescents' sense of purpose and school effort?
- (2) Are the relations of positive regard to civic engagement and GPA mediated through sense of purpose and school effort?
- (3) Is the presence of a mentor associated with higher levels of youth's sense of purpose, school effort, and civic engagement relative to youth who did not report having a mentor but did report having an adult that *gets them*?
- (4) Are there individual differences in the varying strength in the grouped components of perceived positive regard, and, in this sense, how does having a relationally engaged adult compare to having a mentor as traditionally defined?

Context and participants

This study was part of the Search Institute's initiative to focus on 15-year-olds' strengths and passions through the Teen Voice 2010 study (Scales et al., 2011). Participants were recruited through the Harris Poll Online, which is part of the Harris Interactive that includes millions of Americans who have agreed to participate in online surveys. Criteria for participation in the study included being 15 years old and a resident of the United States. Participants were recruited via email. They received points in a rewards program and were offered entry in a sweepstakes drawing for completing surveys. Surveys were self-administered and took participants an average of 20 minutes to complete.

Participants were 1,860 fifteen-year-olds from across the United States who answered this Harris Poll Online web-based panel study. Participant characteristics were weighted to align with census percentages by gender, race/ethnicity, geographic location, urbanicity, and parent education. Of the full sample, 740 youth identified natural mentors or key adults who *got them*. Demographic information on the 740 youth who identified a key adult who *got them* was comparable to the sample at large. See Table 1 for complete demographic information.

Instruments

Participants answered the Harris Poll Online survey administered by the Search Institute comprised of a series of questionnaires as described below.

Demographics. Participants reported gender, race, and parents' highest level of education (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic information for full sample and sample that identified adults who get them.

	Frequency (%) (<i>N</i> = 1,860)	Frequency (%) (<i>n</i> = 740)
Gender		
Male	49.5	49
Female	50.5	51
Race		
White	58.0	60.0
Hispanic	17.5	16.2
Black or African American	15.4	16.1
Mixed Race	4.1	3.5
Asian or Pacific Islander	3.6	2.5
Native American or Alaskan Native	.7	.5
Other Race	.7	.4
Declined to answer	.01	.01
Parents' Highest Education Level		
Did not complete high school	6.3	4.3
Completed high school, no college	45.5	44.2
Completed college	23.8	25.7
Completed graduate school	20.2	20.4

Note. Full sample, *N* = 1,860; Sample that identified adults who get them, *n* = 740.

Perceived positive regard

The Perceived Positive Regard scale was created for this study to assess the extent to which youth felt liked and understood by the adults in their lives. After generating a larger pool of 24 items, a panel of doctoral-level researchers at the Search Institute and expert consultants selected seven items (subject to survey length constraints) that best described youth's positive and negative perceptions and experiences in relationships. The items were generated based on qualitative and quantitative studies of formal and natural mentoring relationships, teacher-student relationships, and therapeutic alliances, in addition to several steps taken to identify factors that might affect youth's feelings of relational engagement. First, the Search Institute research team conducted in-depth qualitative interviews and held focus sessions with eight small groups of adolescents (aged 14–16) prior to constructing the items. From this activity and discussions with teachers, coaches, camp counselors, and researchers, a list of 24 items that captured youth's experience of perceived relational engagement with adults was created. From the larger list of items, seven items were determined to best capture the construct of youth perceived relational engagement (see Appendix for items).

Only youth who indicated they had an adult who *got them* ($n = 740$) answered the perceived positive regard questionnaire. To investigate the structure of this 24-item scale described above, participants were randomly split into two equal groups ($n = 370$) in order to first run an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with one group of participants and then conduct a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) based on the EFA findings with the second group. A principal-axis exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was run in SPSS 22, with results suggesting that a two-factor model fit the data. Multiple methods were used to determine the number of factors to retain, including the scree test (Cattell, 1966) and the Kaiser criteria (eigenvalue > 1 rule; Kaiser, 1960). This two-factor solution was supported in that it yielded a simple, interpretable factor structure and produced a pattern matrix in which items loaded onto only one factor with a cutoff value of 0.32, as suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001; see Table 2). The two-factor solution

Table 2. Loadings for two factors of adults who 'get them'.

	EFA	CFA	SE
Person who gets you ...			
<i>Attunement</i>			
Listens to you	0.796	0.809	0.028
Is honest with you	0.784	0.702	0.033
Shows up when say they will	0.780	0.612	0.039
Remembers things you said from earlier conversations	0.711	0.666	0.036
Laughs at your jokes or jokes around with you	0.599	0.556	0.042
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	3.17		
<i>% of Variance</i>	45.30		
<i>Opportunity</i>			
Gives you special privileges	0.850	0.467	0.066
Holds you to higher standards than other kids	0.781	0.703	0.083
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	1.11		
<i>% of Variance</i>	15.79		

aligned with the hypothesized developmental and instrumental approaches. Factor 1 was called *Attunement*, which accounted for 45.30% of the total variance, and Factor 2 was called *Opportunity*, which accounted for 15.79% of the total variance. The five-item Attunement factor had good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .80 (George & Mallery, 2003), and the two-item Opportunity factor had a moderate/low internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .58, though the two items were fairly correlated at .37, suggesting this scale should be used. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then performed on the other half ($n = 370$) of the randomly split dataset using MPlus version 7 with maximum likelihood estimation. The CFA confirmed the two-factor structure (see Table 2; $\chi^2(13, N = 370) = 42.669, p < .001$; CFI = .954, RMSEA = .079 (90% CI: .053, .105), SRMR = .043; (Hu & Bentler, 1998, 1999). The reliability for this sample was also good: The Attunement factor yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .80, and the two-item factor of the Opportunity yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .49.

Mentor. To assess whether youth had a mentor, participants were asked, 'Other than your parent/s or whoever is raising you, do you have a role model or mentor who you go to for support and guidance? [sic]' The question included the following, commonly used, definition of a mentor: 'Not everyone has a mentor – this is someone who is older and has more experience than you, you could count on to be there for you, believes in and cares deeply about you, and inspires you to do your best' (Klaw, Rhodes, & Fitzgerald, 2003; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Participants were then asked if they had spent time with this kind of mentor in the last 12 months (yes/no).

Sense of Purpose was a five-item scale from Search Institute's Thriving Orientation Survey (Benson & Scales, 2009). Participants rated statements, such as 'I feel a sense of purpose and/or meaning in life,' using a four-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating a greater sense of purpose ($\alpha = .76$).

School Effort was measured through a single item from the National Promises Study (Scales et al., 2008), asking participants how often they work up to their ability at school, using a four-point Likert scale where 1 = *Never* and 4 = *Very often*.

Grade Point Average (GPA) was calculated based on participants' self-reported grades in each of the classes for which they received a grade of A, B, C, D, or below D.

Civic Engagement was a six-item scale drawing items from the Monitoring the Future survey (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2006). Participants were asked to rate the importance of various prosocial values such as making a contribution, helping the poor, and serving the community. Items were rated on a four-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater civic engagement ($\alpha = .86$).

Data collection

Password-protected email invitations were sent to thousands of individuals who were identified either as United States residents and 15 years old or United States residents with a 15-year-old child in the household. Reminder invitations were sent two days after the initial email to those who had not yet completed the survey. Participants received points in a rewards program and were offered entry in a sweepstakes drawing for completing surveys. This recruitment process resulted in 1,860 participants completing surveys between October 12 and 9 November 2009. Since there was no way to distinguish who actually read the email invitation, it was not possible to calculate a traditional response rate, but Harris Interactive estimates that approximately 10% of invitees typically participate in such online surveys (Scales et al., 2010). Surveys were self-administered and took participants an average of 20 minutes to complete.

Data analysis

To investigate the research questions, structural equation modeling, in which Attunement and Opportunity predicted sense of purpose and effort related to GPA and civic engagement, was examined. Additional analyses investigated whether this model varied by demographic characteristics. A further examination focused on whether having an adult who *got* (i.e., showed positive regard) was related to varying levels of purpose, effort, grades, and civic engagement. This was compared with having or not having a mentor. Latent class analysis was used, a person-centered analysis that allows delineation of how different variables combine without a priori hypotheses (Magnusson, 1998; Muthén & Muthén, 2010), to assign participants into groups of varying levels of perceived positive regard. Individual differences groups were examined for relations with levels of purpose, effort, GPA, and civic engagement.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Frequencies and percentages of the role of adults who *get* ($N = 740$) were calculated (see Table 3). The most common adult by whom youth felt *gotten*

Table 3. Frequency relationship types for adults that ‘gets them’.

Relationship (N = 740)	Frequency (%)
Teacher	170 (23.0)
Aunt or Uncle	144 (19.5)
Religious or youth group leader	102 (13.8)
Grandparent	70 (9.5)
Coach	63 (8.5)
Neighbor	49 (6.6)
All other relationships (e.g., friend’s parent, family friend, godparent, cousin, boyfriend’s mother)	142 (19.1)

Table 4. Correlation matrix of developmental assets and outcome variables.

		1	2	3	4	5
1	Opportunity					
2	Attunement	.38***				
3	Purpose	.26***	.34***			
4	School effort	.15***	.24***	.38***		
5	Civic engagement	.24***	.17***	.62***	.27***	
6	GPA	.13**	.13**	.26***	.42***	.15***

Note. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

was a teacher (23%), followed by an aunt or uncle (19.5%). Correlations between variables are presented in Table 4. Mean levels of each of the measures are presented below in the group comparisons.

Pathways from gets them to positive youth outcomes

To investigate how relationships with such adults were associated with positive youth outcomes (RQ1-3), a path model in MPlus7 was employed. Attunement and Opportunity were entered as exogenous variables assessing perceived positive regard (i.e., *gets*), which predicted GPA and civic engagement through sense of purpose and effort. Indirect paths from perceived positive regard through school effort and purpose to civic engagement and GPA were investigated using MacKinnon's (2008) guidelines for testing statistical mediation (see Figure 2). Using this strategy, mediation was examined by investigating the direct paths between variables and the total indirect path and its significance.

Analysis of the hypothesized path model revealed a good fit of this model to the data, $\chi^2(4) = 16.74, p < .01$, CFI = .99, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .01, (90% CI: .02, .06), (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Results of the path coefficients are standardized on X and Y and are presented in Figure 2. Perceptions of adults being attuned and providing opportunities were positively related to youth's feelings of purpose and effort in school, and this, in turn, was related to higher GPA and civic engagement. More specifically, in looking at the mediational paths, the total sum of indirect effects was significant for Attunement being associated with

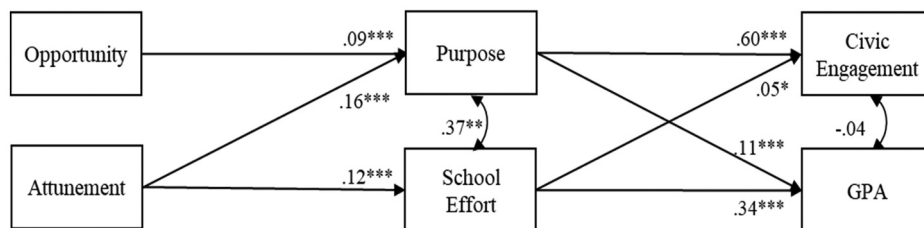


Figure 2. Structural equation model examining the relations among perceived positive regard, developmental assets, and youth outcomes. Note: Coefficients are standardized. Correlations between variables are presented in Table 4. GPA = grade point average; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

GPA (Estimate = .06, $p < .001$). Specifically, indirect effects were significant for paths from Attunement to GPA through effort (Estimate = .04, $p < .001$), and through purpose (Estimate = .03, $p < .01$). The total sum of indirect effects was significant for Opportunity associated with GPA (Estimate = .03, $p = .009$); however, only one path was significant from Opportunity through purpose to GPA (Estimate = .01, $p = .004$). Similarly, Attunement was associated with civic engagement (Estimate = .10, $p < .001$), through effort (Estimate = .01, $p = .031$) and purpose (Estimate = .10, $p < .001$). Opportunity was also associated with civic engagement (Estimate = .06, $p < .001$), but only through purpose (Estimate = .05, $p < .001$). Considering gender differences, effort did not predict civic engagement for females (Estimate = .004, $p = .884$), though the results were consistent for male participants. When parsing the data according to race, the model was generally similar except that Attunement was significantly related to effort only for White participants. For Asian participants, effort and purpose were not significantly related to GPA. In looking at parent education, the positive association between Attunement and Opportunity predicting purpose became non-significant for youth whose parents had not completed high school or college, and Opportunity to purpose became non-significant for those whose parents had completed high school but not college. For youth whose parents completed high school but not college, the relations between purpose predicting civic engagement and effort predicting GPA remained significant, while the other relations became non-significant.

Relationship of adult presence to positive youth outcomes

Another focus of this study was to investigate whether effects vary by the strength of perceived relational engagement and how having a relationally engaged adult compares to having a mentor as traditionally defined (RQ4). To investigate this research question, participants were grouped based on their perceived positive regard based on person-centered analyses. After the groups were created, each group was compared on mean level differences between the different outcomes. Similarly, youth who nominated a mentor were compared to youth who did not nominate a mentor.

Profiles of gets: person-centered approach

To determine how levels of the two components of *gets* – Attunement and Opportunity – naturally grouped together, latent class profile analyses were employed using MPlus7 (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2013). A two-group through four-group solution was tested using z-scores of Opportunity and Attunement. The number of participants in each group and comparison between the Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC) and the Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) across latent class solutions (Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007), as well as

entropy, were used to determine how many groups of *gets* best fit the data. As Nylund et al. (2007) recommended, solutions with lower values of BIC and AIC are considered to have a better fit. Additionally, because groups with less than 25 participants may be an artifact of the forced solution, any solution with less than 25 participants was thought to be questionable. Accordingly, a four-group solution produced a group that had only eight participants. A two-group solution and a three-group solution fit the data well. Due to the similar model fit across these two solutions (two-group: BIC = 3842.146, AIC = 3809.900; three-group: BIC = 3744.979, AIC = 3698.913), as well as similar entropy (two-group: .92; three-group: .90), a three-group solution was chosen as it was more descriptive of the data and in line with the recommendation for lower BIC and AIC.

Overall, the three groups that emerged differed in their levels of Attunement and Opportunity as indicated by the multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA), $F(4, 1472) = 730.477, p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .67$; observed power = 1.00. One group of youth endorsed having an adult who *gets* but with minimal levels of Attunement and Opportunity were labeled *low regard*. There was also a *moderate regard* and a *high positive connection* group. Further examination revealed between-group differences across the Attunement and Opportunity components, $F(2,737) = 47.631, p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .11$; observed power = 1.00. In examining which group differences were significant, post-hoc analyses (Bonferonni-corrected) revealed significant differences between the groups on both Attunement and Opportunity. Individuals in the low regard group ($n = 96$) reported the lowest levels of perceived Opportunity ($M = -.79, SE = .10$) and Attunement ($M = -2.13, SE = .03$). The high positive connection group ($n = 511$) reported the highest level on both of the *gets* components, Opportunity ($M = .20, SE = .04$) and Attunement ($M = .57, SE = .02$). The moderate regard group ($n = 133$) reported moderate levels of Opportunity ($M = -.19, SE = .09$) and Attunement ($M = -.57, SE = .03$). Although this echoes a general increasing pattern, when investigating between-group differences, a different picture emerges.

Relationship of presence of adult that *gets* (perceived positive regard) to positive youth outcomes

A MANOVA was used to examine how positive regard profiles relate to youth academic and civic engagement outcomes. For these analyses, the group of youth who did not nominate an adult (i.e., no engagement) was included to investigate the continuum from not having an adult who *gets* youth to the highest level of positive regard (RQ4). There were significant differences in positive youth outcomes based on the level of perceived positive regard, as indicated by the MANOVA, $F(12,4640) = 10.57, p < .000$, Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.931$, partial $\eta^2 = .023$; observed power = 1.00. Bonferroni post-hoc analyses revealed

Table 5. Mean and standard error of positive youth outcomes by gets group.

	Purpose		School Effort		Civic Engagement		GPA	
	Mean	Std. Error	Mean	Std. Error	Mean	Std. Error	Mean	Std. Error
No engagement	3.09 ^a	0.02	3.06 ^a	0.03	2.49 ^a	0.02	3.28 ^a	0.02
Low regard	2.89 ^b	0.05	2.85 ^a	0.09	2.45 ^a	0.08	3.19 ^a	0.07
Moderate Regard	3.17 ^{ab}	0.04	3.12 ^{ab}	0.07	2.62 ^{ab}	0.06	3.23 ^{ab}	0.06
High positive connection	3.35 ^c	0.02	3.32 ^b	0.04	2.77 ^b	0.03	3.42 ^b	0.03
MANOVA	$F = 36.33$ $p < .001$		$F = 15.27$ $p < .001$		$F = 18.88$ $p < .001$		$F = 5.58$ $p < .01$	

Note: Different letters denote significant differences between gets groups on the particular outcome as found in post-hoc group comparisons. For example, the means of 'a' and 'b' are significantly different from each other, whereas there is no significant difference between 'a' and "ab.

Table 6. Mean and standard error of positive youth outcomes based on mentor presence.

	Purpose		School Effort		Civic Engagement		GPA	
	Mean	Std. Error	Mean	Std. Error	Mean	Std. Error	Mean	Std. Error
No Mentor	3.06	0.02	3.02	0.03	2.44	0.02	3.29	0.02
Mentor	3.27	0.02	3.24	0.03	2.73	0.02	3.33	0.03
MANOVA	$F = 69.75$ $p < .001$		$F = 31.90$ $p < .001$		$F = 80.49$ $p < .001$		$F = 1.30$ $p = .255$	

Note. There were significant differences between the no mentor and mentor groups on all youth outcomes except for GPA.

between-group differences across the various outcomes, $F_{\text{Purpose}}(3) = 36.33$; $F_{\text{School Effort}}(3) = 15.27$; $F_{\text{GPA}}(3) = 5.58$; $F_{\text{Civic engagement}}(3) = 18.88$. As seen in Table 5, youth in the high positive connection group reported significantly higher levels of purpose, school effort, civic engagement, and GPA than the no engagement and low regard groups. Youth in the no engagement group had significantly higher purpose than the youth in the low regard group.

Relationship of mentor presence to positive youth outcomes

A similar MANOVA was conducted to examine the mentor versus no mentor groups. There were significant differences, $F(4,1756) = 26.26$; Wilk's $\Lambda = .944$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .056$; observed power = 1.00, on all youth outcomes except for GPA (see Table 6). Specifically, the presence of a mentor was associated with levels of youth's sense of purpose, school effort, and civic engagement that are significantly higher than those of youth who did not report having a mentor.

Discussion

In this study, associations between youth's perceptions of having an adult who gets them (i.e., shows positive regard) were explored. Youth who perceived such positive regard from a caring adult were expected to feel more connected to their community and school, which, in turn, would lead to positive academic and civic outcomes. This expanded definition of natural mentoring was compared to participant reports about formal mentors. Asking young people if there

are any nonparent adults in their lives who provide an alternative, potentially more assessable way of capturing these developmentally important relationships, which may not be captured by the more intense definition usually employed in studies of natural or formal mentors (e.g., Hagler, Raposa, & Rhodes, 2019). Adolescents identified a range of adults who *got them*, and levels of perceived positive regard were positively associated with positive developmental outcomes, including grades, school effort, sense of purpose, and civic engagement.

The most common *getters* were teachers and aunts/uncles, followed by religious or youth group leaders, grandparents, and coaches. Past studies of natural mentors have yielded relatively lower rates of teacher nominations (e.g., DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). The comparatively high likelihood of teachers being nominated is refreshing, given their prominent role in the lives of many youth (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). Indeed, nearly a quarter (23%) of youth in the current study felt that at least one teacher *got them* (see Table 3). Surprisingly, feeling *gotten* by any adult was positively associated with GPA, whereas there was no such association with having a formal mentor. These positive outcomes speak to the important role that teachers and other school staff may play in helping youth feel engaged in school and promoting academic success (Ben-Eliyahu, 2019; Black, Grenard, Sussman, & Rohrbach, 2010). Along these lines, Pianta and colleagues have identified the key qualities of successful teacher-student relationships: the ability to read a youth's emotional and social signals accurately and respond accordingly, to offer warmth and acceptance, to offer assistance when necessary, and to enact appropriate structures and limits (Pianta et al., 2003). To the extent that teachers are made more aware of the important relational dimensions of their roles and can convey a true sense of positive regard to their students, findings from our study suggest they will be better positioned to advance student success. Finally, the high occurrence of aunts and uncles converges with past studies of natural mentoring relationships that categorize these extended family members as playing a particularly important role as natural mentors (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Greenberger et al., 1998; Klaw et al., 2003).

On a lesser note, only 40% of the youth felt that there was at least one nonparent adult who *got them*. However, when the youth who nominated an adult to whom they actually were not particularly engaged (i.e., the low regard group) were removed, the subsample dropped to 35%. Given that having a caring adult is positively associated with adaptive developmental relationships and academic and civic outcomes (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2014), this relatively low rate is troubling. It may be that many adults feel constrained in their roles or have neither the time nor inclination to engage in the kind of attuned, sometimes jocular behavior that gives rise to youth's perceived positive regard. Moreover, changing family and marital patterns, crowded schools, and less cohesive communities have dramatically reduced the availability of caring

adults in the lives of youth (Raposa et al., 2018). Even when they are available, however, fewer American adults are willing to informally engage outside the parameters of their prescribed roles with the youth in their settings (Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006). Parents have come to be considered solely responsible for their children, so the involvement of other adults is often met with suspicion and discomfort. It is, therefore, useful to consider adults that youth perceive as having positive regard toward them, thereby enabling a broader, more inclusive view of caring adults that may have an important role in shaping youth development.

Dimensions of *gets*

For the empirical investigation of perceived positive regard, both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were employed. The results of the EFA and CFA suggest that the behaviors that characterize adults who *get* youth can be classified by a two-factor solution of Attunement and Opportunity. Consistent with previous research, their dual presence suggests that close relationships incorporate dimensions of both instrumental and developmental relationships (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010; Morrow & Styles, 1995). Specifically, the Attunement dimension captures an aspect of positive regard in which key adults convey to youth that they care for them, value them, and are genuinely engaged with them. Adults demonstrate such positive regard by listening to youth, being dependable, and remembering things from past conversations. These adults are trustworthy and reliable, which is key to building relationships (Gaddis, 2012; Spencer, 2006), and they also incorporate humor into their interactions. In this sense, these adults are potential natural mentors who do not necessarily view themselves as such, but nevertheless may function as a protective factor for adolescents (Van Dam et al., 2018; Wittrup et al., 2016),

The Opportunity dimension captures a distinct, yet complementary, aspect of positive regard in which the adults convey to youth that they believe in them enough to give them special privileges and hold them to higher standards. This is in line with the concept of wise feedback, in which youth learn to attribute critical feedback in school to their teachers' high standards and belief in their potential, resulting in improvements in their quality of work (Yeager et al., 2014). The items, however, touch on the potential conflict between preferential treatment and fairness to other youth. It may seem inappropriate to encourage adults, specifically teachers, to treat their students differentially. Yet, the findings highlight the potential benefits that are associated with feeling somehow that they are held in special positive regard. Regarding the item that inquires about privileges, 'privileges' were not defined in this study, so youth responded subjectively and might have been thinking of anything from trivial privileges (e.g., being asked to assist with a class activity) to

introduction to people and resources (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2014; Benson & Scales, 2009). Formal mentoring programs may benefit by implementing mentor training to enhance mentee perceived positive regard through Attunement and Opportunity.

Relationship of *gets* profiles to positive youth outcomes

To identify ways in which components of perceived positive regard from natural mentors combine and reveal individual differences, person-centered analyses were used. Youth naturally sorted into three groups that varied on the basis of relationship intensity. The high positive connection group showed significantly higher levels of all positive youth outcomes than youth with either no or low regard. Interestingly, identifying an adult that could be considered a natural mentor, yet perceiving low levels of positive regard, appears to be associated with fewer benefits than simply not identifying any adults who fill this role. This aligns with findings related to formal mentoring, according to which it is not merely the presence of a caring adult, it is the quality and intensity of the relationship that is most important (Bayer, Grossman, & DuBois, 2015; Bowers et al., 2016).

Pathways from *gets* to positive youth outcomes

In considering how the components of an adult who *gets* leads to a range of outcomes, results of the mediation analyses demonstrated that both school effort and sense of purpose mediated the relationships between perceived positive regard and both GPA and civic engagement. Consistent with past studies (e.g., Flanagan, 2004; Lerner et al., 2006), school effort had a stronger association with GPA, whereas purpose had a stronger association with youth civic engagement (Leffert et al., 1998; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Interestingly, this finding was even stronger for youth whose parents completed college, for whom effort was not significantly related to civic engagement and purpose was not significantly related to GPA. It may be that such parents fill a void that is not available for youth whose parents have not completed college. It may be that parents who have a high school diploma or less either lack the skills or motivational knowledge to push youth toward academic learning or lack a certain vision necessary to instill a sense of purpose or understanding that effort pays off. Another interesting finding was that for non-White participants, Attunement was not related to effort. It may be that for minority youth, Attunement is not enough to spark effort toward learning. Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, and Herrera (2011) found that minority status was related to poorer teacher-student relationships, suggesting that there might be other influences beyond the mentor that determine youth efforts in school. It may be that for minorities, the type of mentoring relationship contributes in different ways

(Kochan, 2013). For example, Timpe and Lunkenheimer (2015) found that African American fatherless youth benefited from a natural male mentor more than when looking at the whole sample or in comparison to a female mentor or no mentor. Similarly, Wittrup et al. (2016) found that natural mentors play a protective role for Black youth against detrimental impacts of perceived discrimination on academic outcomes and promoting academic engagement. The current findings add to this literature by suggesting that researchers consider adults who serve as natural mentors in this capacity. The finding that for Asian participants, effort and purpose were not significantly related to GPA also requires further inquiry on the role of natural mentors beyond parents for Asian youth.

Limitations

Although this study has several strengths, including a large, ethnically diverse, national sample, there are also several limitations that should be noted. First, data were collected via a cross-sectional self-report survey and, consequently, it is impossible to determine the direction of the effects. Specifically, it remains possible that youth who have better grades and higher levels of school effort, purpose, and civic engagement are also more appealing to and connected with adults. Longitudinal research is needed to determine the direction of effects, as well as to examine if having an adult who *gets* leads to better outcomes over time. However, recent longitudinal research suggests that students who have higher levels of such developmental relationships in one year do have higher GPAs the following year (Scales et al., 2011). There may also be a response bias at play, with some youth biased toward reporting both higher levels of being *gotten* and stronger outcomes. Triangulation of data from additional respondents and sources would also be helpful in controlling for this bias and in further understanding whether or not the youth's perceptions of Attunement and preferential treatment align with adult self-reported behaviors. Moreover, although the seven-item, two-factor scale offers a simple and interpretable factor structure for perceived positive regard, it would be beneficial to add items that capture more subtle distinctions in the Opportunity factor (e.g., Syvertsen, Pekel, Roehlkepartain, & Scales, 2014). Another issue that may be considered in future research is the impact of social media on forming adult-child relationships. It would be interesting to investigate how adult-child interactions have shifted over the years with the advancement of technology, providing youth a way to reach adults that *get them* even though they may not be formal mentors (Single & Single, 2005).

Despite these limitations, this study has important practical and theoretical implications. For years researchers have known that caring adults are

vitaly important resources for youth but have asked about such adults in relatively narrow, adult-centered terms. By identifying the behaviors that characterize positive regard and their associations with outcomes, these findings provide the rationale for additional research and suggest strategies for teachers, aunts, uncles, coaches, and other adults to forge more meaningful connections with the youth in their lives, thereby assuming the role of natural mentors without the daunting commitment that the label of 'mentoring' behooves. An important implication of these findings is that youth benefit from non-formal mentoring by adults who take a role in youth's lives. It may be enough for adults to simply listen – to be attuned—in order to instill a sense of purpose and motivate effort.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

All Instruments are presented below from the Search Institute's Thriving Orientation Survey (Benson & Scales, 2009)

Adult Who Gets/Perceived Positive Regard

Is there an adult you know outside your immediate family (such as a neighbor, teacher, coach, aunt, or uncle) who 'gets' you (meaning they seem to understand and like you)? (yes, no, not sure)

How often does this person do each of the following to show you that they get you? (a lot, some, not much)

- (1) Holds you to higher standards than other kids.
- (2) Gives you special privileges.
- (3) Remembers things you said from earlier conversations.
- (4) Shows up when they say they will.
- (5) Laughs at your jokes or jokes around with you.
- (6) Listens to you.
- (7) Is honest with you.

Mentor

In the last 12 months, have you spent time with this kind of a mentor?

- 1 = yes
2 = no

Sense of Purpose

- (1) I feel a sense of purpose or meaning in life.
- (2) I feel hopeful when I think about my future.
- (3) I have a lot to look forward to in my life.
- (4) I plan to do something that matters in other people's lives.
- (5) It is important to find purpose and meaning in my life.

School Effort was measured through a single item from the National Promises Study (Scales et al., 2008), which asked participants how often they work up to their ability at school, using a four-point Likert scale where 1 = 'Never' and 4 = 'Very often.'

Grade Point Average (GPA) was calculated based on participants responses to a series of questions asking in how many classes they had received a grade of A, B, C, D, or below D. GPA was calculated as the mean grade (where A = 4 points; B = 3 points, etc.), after controlling for the number of classes taken (so that small numbers of classes did not inflate a student's GPA).

Civic Engagement

Items were rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'Not Important' to 4 = 'Extremely Important.'

- (1) Importance of – Making a contribution to society.
- (2) Importance of – Being a leader in my community.
- (3) Importance of – Working to correct social and economic inequalities.
- (4) Importance of – Serving my country.
- (5) Importance of – Improving race relations.
- (6) Importance of – Helping people who are poor.