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## Developmentally-Responsive Relationships During After School

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**Abstract:** Research has shown that afterschool programs are effective in improving academic performance, helping children develop better work habits and social skills, reducing the likelihood of at-risk behaviors, and decreasing school-based crime. Many agree that such results would not be prominent if it weren't for the supportive nature of children's relationships with staff. This manuscript presents a theoretical understanding of the connection between relationships and human growth and development. Observations of outstanding youth workers will show how relationships are used to leverage the development of young people. The author also provides a model of adult-as-community-builder that elaborates the specific methods by which youth workers create what is being called here, *developmentally-responsive relationships*. The manuscript ends with suggestions for enhancing the vitality of adult-youth connections and supporting the growth of youth professionals.

### Introduction

Research has shown that afterschool programs are effective in improving academic performance, helping children develop better work habits and social skills, reducing the likelihood of at-risk behaviors, and decreasing school-based crime (Dryfoos, 1999; Kahne, Nagaoka, Brown, O'Brien, Quinn, & Thiede, 2001; Posner, & Vandell, 1994; Vandell, & Ramanan, 1991). But how and why are these changes happening? Many agree that the central factor for determining program quality and effectiveness is children's relationships with staff (Anderson-Butcher, Cash, Saltzburg, Midle, & Pace, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gambone & Arbretton, 1999; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Noam, & Fiore, 2004).

Interestingly, in today's public schools many teachers feel pressured to ensure that children are reaching academic standards and are ready for the test. This pressure leads many to "teach to the middle" in order to get through the prescribed curriculum. Relationship building becomes secondary to meeting academic standards.

For the past decade, the author has visited, observed, filmed, and researched afterschool programs in New York City. Also, as a teacher educator, the author spends much time in urban public classrooms. From these two educational contexts comes interesting distinctions. Teachers with whom the author has spoken are deeply concerned about the impact that a system of testing and accountability is having on their relationships with the children and as a result on children's overall development. Conversely, in many community-based afterschool programs, youth workers put relationship building first (Anderson-Butcher, Cash, Saltzburg, Midle, & Pace, 2004; Fusco, 2003; Gambone, & Arbretton, 1999; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). They, in fact, support the development of children through their relationships.

This manuscript presents a theoretical understanding of the connection between relationships and human growth and development. Observations of outstanding youth workers will show how relationships are used to leverage the development of young people. The author also provides a model of adult-as-community-builder that elaborates the specific methods by which youth workers create what is being called here, *developmentally-responsive relationships*. The manuscript ends with suggestions for enhancing the vitality of adult-youth connections and supporting the growth of youth professionals.

## The Relationship-Development Connection

*It's after school . . . 4:00 p.m. on a Tuesday. Three girls, two boys, and two youth workers are on a small stage in a community theater. They are warming up with various movement activities. Tasia, a 5<sup>th</sup> grade African-American girl, asks if she can lead the first activity. With animated movement and voice, she leads a choral poem.*

*Tasia: I stand  
Everyone: I stand  
Tasia: I stand tall  
Everyone: I stand tall  
Tasia: I see you all  
Everyone: I see you all  
Tasia: Far  
Everyone: Far  
Tasia: And wide  
Everyone: And wide  
Tasia: We stand  
Everyone: We stand  
Tasia: Silent  
Everyone: Silent.*

*It's 4:20 p.m. Tasia is on stage with one of the youth workers improvising her play. The remaining students are seated in the audience. At the end of the*

*scene, the audience members provide suggestions. The scene is done again, this time using the suggestions provided by the viewers. The students take turns as actors and audience members.*

*It's 5:15 p.m. Tasia is seated at the computer working on her script. Ms. I squats next to her to see how her script is coming along. She notices an oversight and states to Tasia: "You have to put that in italics. Remember, because it's telling me about what the business is onstage. Like when you run around the stage, that's stage business. You're not actually doing dialogue, but you're running around, you're doing action. The blackout is the same thing so put it in italics." Tasia responds with an emphatic but hopeful sigh, "OK." Ms. I pats Tasia's shoulder and mimics back, "Okay... You can do it. Writing is rewriting." Tasia lets out an exasperated giggle.*

At this afterschool program, children are developing plays that they will perform in front of a live audience at the end of the year. They use improvisational activities to create the characters and lines for their scripts. As they begin to create plots, settings, and themes for their plays they provide each other with feedback and suggestions. They spend about an hour each day on stage and then an hour in the computer room typing and revising their scripts. After a full day of school, they become actors, screenplay writers, editors, producers, directors, and audience members. The work is challenging. If it weren't for the relationships that are conscientiously built each day, I suspect the children would find this work grueling, rather than *growthful*.

We know that during the school day children who experience caring relationships with their teachers are more satisfied with school (Baker, 1999; Perry, 1996). In fact, as early as first grade, children's relationships with their teachers predict their feelings about school, as well as, their perceptions of competence (Valeski, & Stipek, 2001). Even when controlling for students' prior motivation, perceptions of care still account for students' academic efforts and goals in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Wentzel, 1997).

Students have defined a caring teacher as someone who helps them with their work, takes the time to make sure they understand, makes class interesting, provides support and positive reinforcement, maintains a positive and democratic classroom environment, and is even "on your back" (Baker, 1999; Ferreira, & Bosworth, 2001; Wentzel, 1997). Caring teachers show respect for students as individuals. They allow students to make their own mistakes without judgment. They discipline rather than punish and are authoritative without being adversarial (Deiro, 2003). This type of authenticity allows teachers to embrace teaching/learning moments with flexibility and maintain the ability to pause and enter into unscripted dialogue with their students. Teachers who recognize the importance of relationships understand that learning is not simply a cognitive endeavor; it is a human one.

But what is the actual function of relationships in supporting children's overall development? The writings of Lev Vygotsky, Russian psychologist, provide insights into how relationships can facilitate youth development, particularly his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (or ZPD as it is affectionately referred; Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD is the distance between the child's actual developmental level, as determined by independent problem solving, and the child's potential development, as determined through problem solving tasks in collaboration with adults or more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). In contrast to paradigms of development

that existed during his time, Vygotsky believed that one could not understand a child until one understood the child's potential. Development was not a static achievement that could be measured once but a dynamic process that required social interaction for its study. The ZPD then provides an understanding of development that is reliant on human relationships.

Common translations of Vygotsky's writings posit that the ZPD is created as the adult, or more cognitively mature person, provides a mental bridge or stepladder for the child. As the adult adjusts the ladder down, the child climbs up to a more advanced cognitive level until no such ladder is needed and the child is capable of achieving the task on his own. The adult scaffolds what they know or understand to the child's level but ever so slightly above the child's level of understanding so that the child can rise to the social occasion. This interpretation focuses on relationships as necessary for providing cognitive support for learning (Rogoff, 1990; Tharp, & Gallimore, 1988; Wertsch, 1985). Human interaction in the teaching-learning moment is relegated to an intellectual exchange.

However, I do not believe that growth emerges from an intellectual exchange alone, nor do I believe this interpretation was Vygotsky's sole intent. He writes:

*Thought is not the superior authority in this process. Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by motivation, i.e., by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions...A true and full understanding of another's thought is possible only when we understand its affective-volitional basis (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 252).*

If we are to take Vygotsky's supposition seriously then there is an emotional realm underlying all learning that must be considered. Speaking of the interrelation between intellect and affect, Vygotsky reminds us, "their separation as subjects of study is a major weakness of traditional psychology, since it makes the thought process appear as an autonomous flow of "thoughts thinking themselves," segregated from the fullness of life, from the personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses, of the thinker (1986, p. 10). If we understand first how Vygotsky viewed learning, as connected to and leading of development, then we will see that relationships are essential not because they provide a cognitive extension to the learner but an emotional one as well.

Learning in a Vygotskian sense, that is, learning that leads development, requires us to stretch who we are, to move out of our comfort zones, to be, in fact, uncomfortable. Learning that leads development is not about acquiring knowledge but about enacting the knowledge that we acquire as we participate in a sociocultural event. It is within the context of the sociocultural event that enacting new knowledge brings about new challenges that require emotional as well as cognitive support. Take a child who has just learned the alphabet song. The child cannot wait for a new audience member to partake in the song. It is with joy and pride that the knowledge is enacted. When the child gets stuck on a letter, someone in the audience offers support and encouragement. In these moments the child invites the adult to share in the joy of learning. Those engaged in developmentally-responsive relationships accept these invitations and sometimes provide new invitations for the child to delve deeper and challenge the child further.

When children are invited to go beyond their current capacities, relationships provide the necessary emotional extension that enable development to occur. In these high challenge moments, it is in relationships that children seek the momentum to persist and find the drive to aspire. The developmentally-responsive act provides a safe space in which children are willing to take risks – a necessary condition for development.

Youth workers seem to recognize that they can impact youth development through their relationships. What is particularly interesting is that they do this not only through one-on-one support but by creating a social environment that allows multiple ZPDs to develop, or through community building.

### **Adult as Community Builder**

Community building goes beyond one-on-one support between adult and child. It frees the adult from sole control and allows peer-to-peer support to flourish. In these environments peer support becomes critical to the development process. Noddings (1992) has argued that the presence of a positive relationship with a caring adult is critical in reforming schools into communities. Students who experience school as community are less likely to engage in drug use and delinquent behaviors (Battistich, & Horn, 1997), are more likely to respect their teachers, and do better in school (Perry, 1996). Community extends the concept of care beyond the dyad of the teacher-student relationship and into the multiple relationships that exist within the group. Yet, research in classrooms shows that most caring acts are unidirectional, from teacher to student, and do not embody the characteristics of a caring community (Ferreira, & Bosworth, 2001). Because teachers play an integral role in how students experience school, more attention needs to be paid to how teachers can conscientiously work on relationship building in the classroom thus changing the sometimes alienated culture of schools. Interestingly, the context of afterschool provides some insights.

*A group of ten children and two adults are standing on stage in a circle holding hands. One of the adults sends to her left a "pulse" by squeezing gently the student's hand. The students are told to simply "pass" whatever message is sent to them to the person on their left. If the group is not functioning as a team, the message is lost.*

*Fifteen middle school boys are standing in a circle in a school gymnasium. They are part of the same baseball team. The coach begins a phrase and the phrase is repeated around the circle. The phrase on this day is Unlimited Potential. The phrase is repeated by each member of the circle...Unlimited Potential...Unlimited Potential... The coach then asks for a volunteer to select another phrase. A boy yells out "teamwork" and the word echoes around the circle.*

*A group of high school students are given an assignment: Write down two to three sentences that express what teenagers want to say to adults. They write things like "they want us to grow so fast but they don't want to let go; you want me to be strong but you shelter me." Each student then picks their favorite line that they wrote individually. Individual lines are brought together to form a composite poem.*

Whether the program is performance arts, baseball, film making, or homework help, these scenes and others like them, suggest that there are commonalities in how many youth workers approach and organize the learning environment to support developmentally-responsive relationships. First, the youth workers engaged in specific activities that were designed to help young people work together as a team and collaborate on projects whether the project was a play, a video, or a baseball game. Building a supportive and caring environment doesn't just happen; it requires the careful planning of youth workers. Second, the activities are explicitly designed to teach young people the social skills that are necessary for collaboration. As one youth worker explains the purpose of collaborative activities,

*One thing that's really fun about Pass the Pulse is that it's a team-building activity so that in a circle people hold hands and one person will start it and it goes around and part of the reason of doing this activity is that it really promotes that if one person is joking around and starts squeezing, it doesn't work, and with a play the same thing is true. If everyone's not focused, it doesn't work quite as well.*

Once the students are working as a team then peer critique and suggestions become a healthy part of the learning process. Students feel safe knowing that their actions and the criticisms that might follow are offered to support growth. They begin to trust that feedback is necessary for learning. Here, multiple zones of development are able to flourish. As another youth worker put it,

*The kids can't succeed alone. It's about community. And on a team you have, that's exactly what you have, a community, each individual working together in order to succeed. That's what the power of teams is all about.*

These scenes depict how youth actively participate in community and how adults work as builders of that community. Figure 1 describes what I saw in developmental afterschool environments.

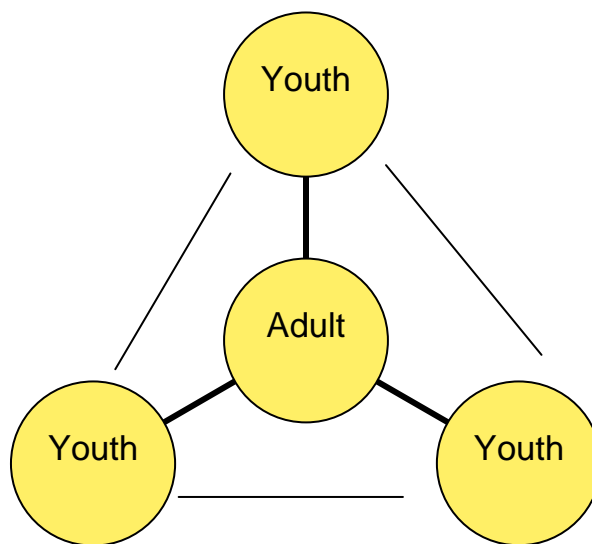


Figure 1

This model highlights several things about relationship building in the context of afterschool programs. First, the adult is in the center. Although that center is also shared, the adult maintains a central position as the leader of the group. This does not mean that the activities are “adult centered.” Quite the contrary, the activities are student centered. Rather, the adult placed in the center depicts the central role of the adult in nurturing a team spirit. The adult is a part of the team, not outside of it. He or she is striving to make personal connections with kids but is also helping the young people to make connections with each other.

Second, the adult as community builder is scaffolding support to individuals when more intense one on one attention is necessary to help the child pass a hurdle. However, the adult is also creating a community of practice that reflects a group dynamic of care and sends the message “We’re in this together.” Here the adult allows youth to have access to each other as part of the learning process and sets a tone for working together as a community. It is important to differentiate the notion of group from community here. A group is made up of people; a community is made up of partnerships and networks of trust. One can be a part of a group and not feel that they belong to a community.

Finally, the adult leads from a position of respect, not from a position of authority or power. The youth worker does not demand respect but builds an environment where respect is the natural result. Working conscientiously to gain kids’ trust, they inspire confidence to offer ideas, suggestions, and even critiques of each other’s work. They create a space where making mistakes is accepted as a natural result of learning.

### **Building Developmentally-Responsive Relationships**

After a decade of visiting, observing, filming, and researching a variety of afterschool programs, the author has gleaned from outstanding youth workers practices that support youth development. Offered are ten specific suggestions for building developmentally-responsive relationships to promote the development of young people and build a community spirit.

1. Begin building a community spirit from Day One of the program by using group building activities such as those described above. Introductory theater books often include activities focused on group building and are easily modified for different ages. Many of these activities, such as Pass the Pulse, allow children to discover why cooperation is important.
2. Don’t be afraid to explicitly state what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior and language. As children begin to understand your expectations allow them to take responsibility for their actions when there is conflict. You can guide the process by asking questions such as, “what do you think you should do here?” or “what can you do to help solve this problem?” Remember that some children have less experience with concepts like teamwork and cooperation and may need reminders about how their actions impact the group. They may need help to view a situation from another person’s perspective. This should be done in a non-punitive and safe environment.



3. Provide opportunities for young people to contribute their ideas and suggestions. Remain open-minded. You model respect by listening and learning from young people. Help children listen to and support each other's ideas as well.
4. Plan, plan, plan. Have an ambitious agenda for each day. When faced with a discipline issue, ask yourself first, "Was I engaging?" Children get restless and are more likely to get in trouble when there is no structure and flow to the activities.
5. Remain flexible while leading. Giving youth voice and sharing power may mean that your agenda gets altered. Know when to alter and when to abandon. Skilled educators recognize when their plan needs minor adjustment to fit children's interest, mood, skill level, etc. and when to abandon and move on.
6. Make time for informal chats with each of the children. Simple questions such as, "how was your day?" or "how was school today?" show children that you care and are available if they need to talk through an issue.
7. Reflect on the day's work. Think about what worked and make modifications for improving what didn't work as well. Include your own reactions and feelings that emerged during the day. There may be times when you feel impatient, tired, frustrated. There are probably lessons within these times that will enable you to grow as a professional and a person if you are honest with yourself.
8. Pay attention to how individual children respond to different activities. Children vote with their feet. A lack of participation might suggest a child is bored (too advanced for the activity) or struggling (needs additional support). Remember that sometimes kids' struggle not with the cognitive demands of the task but with the social and emotional demands of the task. Modifying activities to maximize participation will create an atmosphere where every child feels they have something to contribute.
9. Admit your mistakes. Young people respect adults who are willing to show that they too are sometimes vulnerable and imperfect.
10. Have fun. Joy is infectious. Bring your strengths and your passions to work and embed them in what you do on a daily basis.

## **Conclusion**

Research has long confirmed that relationships are critical to effective youth work, regardless of the setting. Less clear has been how relationships actually function to support learning and development. Drawing upon Vygotsky's writings provides some insights. To Vygotsky, one cannot understand a child until one understands the child's potential and that potential, or ZPD, can only be assessed in the context of relational activity. While translations of Vygotsky's theory have defined the ZPD as a cognitive enterprise, when children are invited to reach their potential, relationships not only provide cognitive support but the necessary emotional extension that enable development to occur. In these high challenge moments, it is in relationships that children seek the momentum to persist and find the drive to aspire.

Youth workers seem to recognize that they can impact youth development through their relationships. What is particularly interesting is that they do this not only through one-on-one support but by creating a social environment that allows multiple ZPDs to develop; they create community. Community building goes beyond one-on-one support between adult and child and allows peer-to-peer support to flourish. While the adult is at the center providing leadership and creating a climate of support, leadership is also shared and distributed because rather than autonomy, leadership means creating a spirit of community and care.

Community building strategies are beneficial tools for all youth professionals from classroom teachers to afterschool youth workers. At times implementing such strategies will be exciting; at times, frustrating. Focusing on one new strategy per week and recording the process might facilitate change without disrupting existing procedures. It is important for youth professionals to establish their own support networks as well. ZPDs occur in a social space (even a hyper-social space) at all ages. Establishing a community of practitioners for shared reflections can deepen one's practice and foster new ideas. Dialoguing with other professionals engaged in similar work can stimulate further inquiries: What strategies promote community building within different settings? Are there common strategies that work across settings? Across ages? How does one balance providing support thought to be growthful to the individual while respecting the individual's right to choose, make decisions, and take responsibility for their own growth? At what point do young people's relationships with each other become developmentally-responsive? While most practitioners seem to intuitively *know* that relationships are central to their work, these and other inquiries can contribute to the field's knowledge about how and why relationships support development, and hopefully help create developmentally-responsive relationships in after school and beyond.

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