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Project Report

Empowering Children for Life: A Preliminary Report

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Abstract

In this first report from the Robert S. and Grace W. Stone Empowering Children for Life Primary Prevention Initiatives, we offer findings from a set of focus groups conducted with children and adolescents about their relationships with the important adults in their lives. Decades of research have demonstrated the link between relationships with caring adults and psychological health and well-being among children and adolescents, but little research to date has sought explicate the underlying processes involved in these key relationships. The purpose of this exploratory study was to listen to young people's descriptions of their experiences in, and understandings of, their relationships with the adults in their lives and to consider the ways in which Relational-Cultural Theory could inform the study of growth-fostering relationships between youth and adults. We conducted seven focus groups with ethnically and socio-economically diverse children and adolescents. These youth poignantly described their desire for strong relationships with adults and the barriers that unfortunately, and too often, seemed to get in the way.

Introduction¹

The importance of caring relationships with adults for the psychological development of children and adolescents has been repeatedly demonstrated across several areas of research within psychology (Rhodes, 2002). The power of the presence of "confiding" relationships for predicting psychological health among children faced with a range of adversities such as parental mental illness (e.g., Rutter, 1979) and child maltreatment (e.g., Cicchetti, 1989) has been highlighted in the developmental psychopathology and resilience literatures (Werner, 1984, 1990). The growing body of research on social support in childhood and adolescence has also found a strong link between good relationships with adults and children's and adolescents' psychological health and well-being (Cauce, Mason, Gonzales, Hiraga, & Liu, 1994; Cotterell, 1992), even into late adolescence (Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995). The link between what have been called "good" (Grossman & Johnson, 1999), "supportive" (Resnick et al., 1997; Cauce et al., 1994; Harter, 1998), and "confiding" or "caring" (Wyman et al., 1999) relationships and greater psychological health and vitality has been firmly established.

How do these relationships with adults promote psychological health? Many researchers are calling for research which illuminates how protective factors operate, rather than simply identifying risk and protective factors. Researchers have specifically cited the need for focused study of the processes or pathways through which relationships with adults offer significant psychological protection in the face of adversity (Masten, 1994; Resnick, Harris & Blum, 1993; Rutter, 1990). However, challenges posed by the empirical study of protective and supportive processes have been identified, including the limitations of the theoretical frameworks² currently being utilized to guide this research (Gottlieb & Sylvestre, 1996;

Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1978, 1979; Sullivan, 1997).

Several developmental-clinical models have pointed to the primacy of connection in people's lives (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan et al., 1991; Gilligan, 1982). These models have suggested that people grow through and toward relationships rather than toward autonomy and separation; furthermore, they have critiqued the prevailing models of separation which posit that healthy development proceeds in a series of stages toward independence and autonomy (Green, 1990). The Relational-Cultural Model (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Jordan, 1997) is beginning to spawn a significant body of empirical research looking at the importance of growth-fostering connections and mutuality in the development of psychological health (Genero, Miller, Surrey, & Baldwin, 1992; Genero, 1995; Liang et al., 1999; Hartling & Ly, 2000), to support the clinical data that has long provided evidence for the value of growth-fostering connection and the experience of mutuality for both men and women. For example, a study of adolescents demonstrated that the higher the perceived mutuality between adolescents and their mothers, the lower the levels of depression in the adolescents (Powell, Denton, & Mattsson, 1995).

In this paper, we explore the potential for the Relational-Cultural Model to contribute to the explication of the important and well-established link between strong relationships with adults and better psychological health in young people. Although relational-cultural theorists have studied relational processes primarily among adults, they have also written about these processes between children and adults as well (Dooley & Fedele, 1999; Mirkin, 1992; Rosen, 1992; Surrey, 1993).

There is an increasing interest in the use of relational perspectives as guiding frameworks for future research on protective or growth-promoting relationships between children and adults (Nestmann & Hurrelmann, 1994; Youniss, 1994). While much psychological theory and research have continued to focus heavily on individual or within-person factors, a recognition of the environmental, contextual, and relational influences on psychological development has been growing. Relational-Cultural Theory asserts that psychological health and vitality are linked with participation in growth-fostering relationships. These relationships, which are thought to form the foundation of psychological development, foster the growth of both participants. Mutuality and empathy are the key features of these relationships, as *both* participants must be (1) actively participating in the construction of the relationship and (2) be open and

responsive to the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of each another (Jordan, 1986; Surrey, 1985; Miller, 1988; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Mutual empathy, at the core of this model, is based on respectful understanding and responsive listening and interacting (Jordan, 1999). People gain a sense of relational competence, or learn that they are effective in building relationships, through participation in mutually empathic interactions. They learn that they matter to each other and experience their feelings and actions as "making a difference," or as directly impacting their relationships (Jordan, 1999).

However, mutuality or mutual empathy between a parent and a child, or between an adult and a young person, does not mean there is total equality or sameness of role. In relationships between adults and young people, the older person is usually in a position of power and responsibility. The adult's role often involves some sense of taking care of the younger person or the relationship; the younger person is not there to take care of or serve the needs of the older person. Using anticipatory empathy and a sense of role responsibility, the adult will be respectful of the younger person's needs and the goal of their interaction will be to empower the younger person.

The emphasis on the centrality of relationships in psychological growth and change importantly directs our attention away from focusing only on the growth of one individual, suggesting instead that all growth is mutual and that the sociocultural contexts in which change and development occur are of utmost importance (Jordan, 1999; Walker & Miller, 2001).

In order to begin an exploration of factors that contribute to growth-fostering relationships between adults and children, we conducted several focus groups with children and adolescents exploring their relationships with adults. These groups were originally conducted for the purpose of bringing the voices and experiences of young people into discussions about a new and developing project at the Stone Center, the *Empowering Children for Life Initiatives*. The young people who participated in these focus groups responded to questions about their relationships with the adults they encountered in their day-to-day lives, such as their parents or other primary caregivers and other adults in their homes and communities.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through ongoing community youth groups and two school-based

Table 1: Description of the Focus Group Participants (n=91)

| Type of group | Number/Gender of Participants | Age range | Racial Background | Income Group |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| <i>Urban</i> | | | | |
| Dance group | 8 females 4 males | 7-10 years | African-American and Latina/o | Low-income |
| Church group | 5 females 5 males | 7-11 years | African- American and Latina/o | Low-income |
| After-school program | 15 females | 12-15 years | Black/Cape Verdean and Latina | Low-income |
| Community Center | 2 females 5 males | 16-18 years | Latina/o and African American | Low-income |
| <i>Suburban</i> | | | | |
| Church group | 5 females 5 males | 10-13 years | White | High-income |
| School-based group | 25 students, males & females | 4th-grade | White and African-American | Middle-income |
| School-based group | 12 males | 12-13 years | White, Latino, and Armenian | Middle-income |

the facilitators followed the issues raised by the participants in each group and both added new questions and adapted the existing questions to be more age and culturally appropriate when necessary. While this strategy limits systematic analysis of the data, due to variation in content, it yields greater breadth by allowing for the discussion of a wider range of topics and giving youth more freedom to talk about their own experiences. The protocol covered two general sets of questions about what comprises a good relationship with an adult and the role that listening plays in these relationships (See Appendix for details). The groups were conducted at sites familiar to the participants and were tape-recorded and transcribed for the purposes of analysis.

programs in a large metropolitan area in the Northeast. The groups were selected to maximize diversity of social and cultural contexts. A total of 91 urban and suburban children and adolescents participated in seven focus groups, which included one dance group, two after-school programs, two church groups, and two school-based programs. As the participants were drawn from community-based groups, the youth in each group shared similar racial and ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The participants ranged in age from seven to eighteen years and the groups included White, African-American, Cape Verdian, Latino and Latina, and Armenian males and females living in low, middle, and high-income families (See Table 1).

Procedures

These groups, which were conducted over a two-month period, lasted from one to one-and-a-half hours and were facilitated by a team consisting of at least one adult and one youth leader recruited from a youth leadership program. The third author was a facilitator in every group, with the exception of one, which was led by another advisory group member. Parental consent for participation in these groups was obtained by the director of each community group. A general protocol was utilized to guide the focus groups, but

Analytic Strategies

A thematic analysis of the focus group data was conducted through standard content coding and the construction of a conceptually-clustered matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Major themes were initially derived by the first author by listening to each tape one time and reading through each corresponding transcript. In this first reading, it was notable that some of the themes in each of the groups corresponded with a couple of the main features of what the Relational-Cultural Model calls growth-fostering relationships: mutuality and authenticity (Jordan, 1986, 1997; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1988; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Mutuality in relationships is most simply defined as both participants' active engagement and responsiveness in the relationship. A key feature of this engagement is that both participants' thoughts, wishes, desires, and needs shape the course of the relationship (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Mutual respect contributes to psychological growth as both people contribute to the relationship and to each other.

Authenticity has been described as a "quality of presence" characterized by "relational responsiveness" (Miller et al., 1999, p. 3). It is distinguished from spontaneous reactivity in that it

involves awareness of one's possible impact on others, a process which has been called *relational anticipatory empathy* (Jordan, 1999). Subsequent readings of the transcripts included codes for both of these specific aspects of relationships. The third author, in collaboration with a college senior and experienced youth worker, coded the transcripts a second time for each of the major themes established by the first author and identified additional ones, which were then checked again by the first author. These analytic strategies yielded a set of major themes which ran throughout all of the groups, and a few themes specific to just one or two of them. These themes are detailed below.

Findings

Types of Important Adults

At least some of the young people in every group were able to identify adults with whom they had a good or close relationship. Although parents and stepparents were named most frequently, other adults included teachers, a youth group leader, older siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, boyfriends of their mothers, and older brothers' girlfriends. Older brothers and sisters and other young adults in their 20's, were frequently identified as adults who the young people felt best understood them and could play and have fun with them. It is possible that through this mutual and open spirit of play, or through simply having fun, the young person experiences mutual impact and mutual effect. In a play situation, the power imbalance which can operate in other arenas of the adult-child relationship may be less operative.

This desire to have time to just have fun with adults, without the pressure of a task to accomplish or a lesson to be learned, was a common theme throughout all of these groups. In one group, a youth organizer was cited as someone young people could talk to because "she acts like a kid herself." These youth expressed a desire for adults to join them in fun activities of their choosing, rather than just being "dragged around" by the adult in the relationship. They thought that having fun together helped build a better relationship—"when you play you can build trust." In the non-play encounters, these youth may have felt that they were having to conform to some standards or images that the adult was imposing. The flow of influence may be experienced as one-way or unidirectional, contributing to the young people not feeling heard. They suggested that younger adults seemed better able to engage in play encounters, and

the younger adults provided a more private and less-emotionally charged place for the youth to talk about their concerns and difficulties.

Mutuality and Respect

Across all of the groups, these young people discussed the importance of an adult engaging with them in ways that engendered mutuality and respect. They generally felt this type of connection with adults who seemed to really care about them for who they were, rather than because they were behaving or achieving in some particular way. While the provision of instrumental support, such as advice, guidance, and financial support, was discussed, this type of support seemed to have the greatest impact when offered within the context of a relationship in which the young person's expressions of his or her wants, needs, desires, and strengths were welcomed and had a direct impact on the relationship.

A significant impediment to the development of a good relationship with an adult identified by these youth was adults viewing young people as "lesser" people, or a lack of a sense of mutuality in their relationships with adults. One seventh-grade boy stated that he thinks most adults "think kids are like low and adults are up there. But I think we are equal. We are still human." One fourth-grade girl pointed out that to have a good relationship with an adult "the adult would have to be treating someone as an equal, and not just pretending to be treating someone as an equal by saying, 'yes, I understand...What was that you said again?'" Others noted the importance of listening and compromise on the part of the adult, so that their opinion counted as well. As one young teen said, "They have to listen to you. You shouldn't just have to listen to adults, adults should listen to you, too." According to the Relational-Cultural Model, in growth-fostering relationships people need to listen actively and empathically, and there needs to be mutual evidence of impact and change (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, 1986; Jordan et al., 1991). Active listening involves a spirit of vulnerability and openness in both participants. It is in this openness to being influenced that real trust and respect reside.

These young people repeatedly described experiencing adults as having a great deal of difficulty seeing young people as equal human beings, albeit with particular developmental needs and limitations. They readily acknowledged the greater knowledge, experience, and authority held by adults and believed that adults should provide limits and adjust the relationship to meet the developmental capacities of the young person. However, they also expressed a

desire for adults to fully engage with them as individuals and to do so with respect.

The adolescents in one group described the interplay between, and interconnectedness of, expectations and respect in good relationships between young people and adults. They described a “mad cool” teacher to whom they felt they could tell anything—to whom they were “mad open”:

Boy: She’s building a good relationship.

Girl: And she is strict at the same time.

Boy: That’s why they accept [her authority].
Cause if you build a good relationship and yet you show you are serious, they respect that.

Girl: That’s the only teacher that has [a] class going on in that school. Like, other teachers, they try, like, “do the work” but nobody does the work, nobody listens to them. That is the only teacher that we like do work in.

These young people perceived this teacher as someone who takes them seriously, earning their respect and allowing them to feel like they can be both open with, and accountable to, her. She has captured these students’ attention, not by abdicating or even downplaying her authority as their teacher, but by coupling her “strictness” with a palpable sense of respect for her students. Or, as one group participant summarized the importance of mutual respect: “sometimes to earn respect you gotta give respect.”

Several examples of the importance of adults setting limits were offered in the groups. A participant in a group of urban adolescent girls described how a youth group leader provided the structure within which these youth group members developed their own rules that everyone was expected to follow. Another participant pointed out how a lack of limits communicates to the young person that he or she is unimportant. She said, “My aunt chose the party life over her daughters...I used to be envious. She [her cousin] could go out, she could stay out late. But then one night I was sleeping and my aunt came in the room with a knife in her hand. She was fighting with her boyfriend and right in front of my eyes I saw them fighting.” Her cousin’s seemingly enviable freedom came at a high price.

Keeping confidences was another key aspect of respect discussed in each of the groups and identified as a central component of relationships with adults that provide real emotional support. In fact, knowing that what they said would *not* be kept confidential—or

a lack of respect for their need for privacy around, what were for them, emotionally charged issues—was one of the most often cited reasons for not talking to adults about the things that were most important to them. Many of these young people expressed a desire to be able to talk to adults in confidence but conveyed the sense that telling an adult something important was all too often the same as telling everyone in their families. The adults these young people felt they had a connection with were often ones who “never told any of my secrets,” providing them with a safe place to talk about concerns that they felt particularly sensitive about or ones they wanted to keep private. The provision of privacy was a foundational aspect of confiding or trusting relationships. When asked how one girl knew that she could trust her father, she replied “I can tell him a whole bunch of stuff and he wouldn’t tell.” The importance of openness beyond a disciplinary relationship was stressed by the older adolescents. As one boy in his late teens urged parents, “don’t show them that you are going to punish them for what they know because they are going to be scared to tell you. You always be open-minded with them.”

Authenticity

In Relational-Cultural Theory authenticity is understood to involve being able to bring oneself as fully as possible into relationship, with awareness of the possible impact on the other person (Jordan, 1999; Miller & Stiver, 1997). This differs from total spontaneity or reactivity, which does not include awareness or concern for the impact on the other person. This authenticity is ordinarily compromised in relationships of unequal power, where the less powerful person is expected to conform to the expectations of the more powerful person (this is true for power differences based on age, status, gender, race, class, etc.). In caring relationships of temporary unequal power (adult/child, caretaker/child, teacher/student), however, the more powerful person will actually be encouraging the growth of authenticity and full voice in the less powerful person. There is an active intention to bring this person into the fullest expression of her or his personhood.

The participants in the suburban coed fourth-grade group discussed their ability to identify when adults were and were not engaging with them authentically. They also described their desire for this type of engagement, in part because it seemed to make the relationship more pleasurable. As one girl, talking about her younger sister, put it, “one of the things you liked about her was that she was herself and she was

someone you could enjoy.” A boy said simply, “I want them to act like themselves.” The boys and girls in this group mimicked the inauthentic voices that adults sometimes used and the effect it had on them. One girl said, “Sometimes I feel like a hamster because my mom is always talking to me in this sweet voice.” A boy then chimed in with the response he would like to give whenever an adult talks to him in one of those voices, saying, “I am not a baby and you don’t have to use that sweet voice.” He went on to state that an adult with whom he has a good relationship did not do this, “...my uncle Mike...we do a lot of stuff together and he talks to me in his normal voice.”

The participants in each of the groups identified good listening as a key component of adults’ authentic engagement with them. They discussed specific ways that adults demonstrate that they are really listening to them. These included “he turns off the TV,” “he is quiet,” and “ask questions about what I said and you have to be listening to know what I said.” One girl described how her father would make sure that he could focus on what she was saying and listen to her without distractions: “Like if something is serious, he will go away from people so that nobody else can hear and then like, he will just find a way to solve it.”

Several participants also gave examples of how they can tell when adults are just acting like they are listening. As one girl said, “If they are bad listeners they just sort of mumble like they are talking to themselves. They just go, ‘Um huh, yeah, that’s right.’ My dad does that all of the time.” A boy noted that when adults listen, young people also have an opportunity to have a direct impact on these relationships. “Like they won’t listen to you sometimes. And like what they say goes. That’s how it usually is. But if you have a good relationship with them, they might compromise with you.” Listening, which leads to compromise, involves risk-taking on the part of both participants. Young people must be willing to state their needs and adults must be open to being impacted by what is being said.

Some young people reported that it was particularly helpful when adults indicated that they could relate to, or understand, the young person’s struggle by drawing parallels to their own experience. As one girl said, “Yeah, like if you tell an adult something, like a problem that you have, and they are a nice adult and helpful adult, they will relate to it and they will say ‘oh yeah, in my life that happened to me and I can relate to it and this is what I did to deal with that.’” In addition to validating and empathizing with the experience of the young person, it is important for the adult to believe what the young person has to say.

One girl described what seemed to her to be an all too typical scenario. “They [adults] usually change the story around. They make you seem like the bad guy. Like if you go up to them to have your back, they turn it on you. Like, ‘What did you do wrong?’ and ‘You should do this and that.’” These girls talked about how this type of response leads them to turn away from adults and toward their peers. “My mom never believes anything. I basically talk to my friends a lot.”

These young people made an important distinction between authenticity and reactivity in relationships. They described shutting down and simply not telling adults, particularly their parents, about things to which they know the adult will react with anger. One girl began by describing the tension she has noticed when adults want to engage with young people, yet have a hard time really hearing all of the complexity in what young people have to say:

They tell you, “tell me anything” but then after you tell them, they get mad at you and stuff so that’s why some kids are scared and be like “She got mad at me last time. I’m not going to tell her again so that she can get mad at me.”

A boy follows up with his analysis:

Sometimes it be like the parent be thinking, “oh I want them to talk to me about everything” but they are thinking the kids are going to do everything right and you don’t want to talk to your parents and let them feel like “oh well I am disappointed at this or that.” You want to make your parents proud and they want you to be like proud of them or whatever...you don’t want to tell them everything that bad but you don’t want to tell them everything that good, so it makes it hard to tell them anything at all...That’s why they should always talk to you from the beginning.

These young people did not seem to be questioning parents’ *desire* to listen, but rather, they saw many factors which impaired their *capacity* to actually do so. Despite parents’ wishes to be a person their children can “tell everything” to, these young people thought that their parents’ own anxieties, fears, expectations, and other demands often interfered with this process. These young people not only noted the tension between their parents’ stated desires and actual behaviors, but they also responded to this tension by telling their parents less about what is going on with them, and they did so out of a desire to make their parents proud. They then find themselves not being authentic in their relationships with their

parents. Some of these failures actually represented failures in empathy: parents not understanding or resonating with the child's experience.

Context-Specific Barriers to Building Relationships

There were three specific barriers to building relationships that were unique to just a few groups. One barrier identified by two of the low-income groups of adolescents was their parents' expression of concern about the health and safety of their children, particularly their mothers' expressions of concern. One of these groups also cited the racism they experienced from teachers in their schools. Another barrier, identified by two of the middle-to-upper-income suburban groups, was that their parents seemed simply too busy to take time out to just hang out or do fun things with them.

The urban adolescents from lower-income families talked quite a bit about their mothers being what they called "overprotective." For the boys, this took the form, for example, of mothers asking them not to wear their gold jewelry, or asking them to conceal it because "there is always going to be someone that is going to want something that you have." The girls talked about their mothers' fears and concerns related to their emerging sexuality. They said that their mothers worried about them getting pregnant or getting involved with abusive boyfriends. One girl stated that she is simply "not allowed to have boyfriends. I do my homework. I'm an honor student. I don't need nobody hitting me." Another girl described her conflict with her mother over this same issue, "I think I'm old enough to have a boyfriend. With my brother, my mom says that he can bring his [girlfriend] home and they can have dinner and everything. But me, when I ask her, 'When I can have a boyfriend?' She said, 'When I go to college.'" While their mothers, sensitive to the potentially dangerous context, seemed to be taking measured steps to insure the health and safety of their children, the youth experienced these actions as, at times, getting in the way of connection.

Another safety threat that was discussed at some length in the group of older urban adolescents was the racism they experience from adults in their schools. These youth talked about being called stupid by teachers and described degrading punishments they had seen in their classrooms. One girl said, "this one teacher, he always puts us down all the time. He goes, 'I know you all gonna fail.'" A boy described getting into a fight with a white boy, "...a white teacher held me down...and they didn't hold him [the white student], he was still attacking, like coming at me, and

they held me back...and I got hit three times." Another girl, talking about her teachers, said, "...they categorize. Like they go, Hispanics: they steal, they pimp. Then they go, black ones are drug dealers, they got pagers. It's like he [her English teacher] goes 'oh, I try to look over the stereotypes but you all just fit them. You fit the category.'" While teachers have been identified as potential sources of significant support (Galbo, 1989; Wang et al., 1994), these youth's experiences with racism and negative judgments from adults in authority may lead to a level of mistrust that could foreclose their sense of the possibility of receiving positive support from other, more trustworthy adults.

The adolescents from higher-income families identified shortage-of-time as a significant barrier to developing good relationships with their parents. These young people expressed a desire to do "fun things" with their parents, "not just running around doing errands." One young person said that in order to have good relationships with their children, parents "have to know that they are going to have to sacrifice their time unless they want their kids to be more comfortable with their baby-sitters than with them." The group of seventh-grade boys was even more pessimistic. When asked if they had ever had a nice connection with an adult, they were not able to name any besides relationships with camp counselors. One boy stated that parents are "always way too busy," prompting the facilitator to ask whether he thought that adults should be less busy for their children. The boy responded by saying, "No. As long as there are things in the fridge." He then elaborated with "They're busy because they are with their jobs and that's the thing that gets us all we need. So it helps, but then it doesn't help because we want them to be at home." This boy seemed to have given up on the possibility that his parents will make time to simply be at home with him.

These two different themes highlight the importance of examining the contexts within which relationships between youth and adults develop and exist. The different pressures faced by the youth and adults in different contexts—the racism and threats to physical safety voiced by the low-income urban adolescents and the encroachment of time pressures into the fabric of family life expressed by the suburban middle and upper-income youth—are likely to impact these relationships in qualitatively different ways. The parents of the urban adolescents are faced with the recognition that the greater freedom that adolescence affords their children also potentially exposes them to more risks. Their context-appropriate anxiety and

desire to protect their children may make it difficult for them to listen to their children express their desires to experiment in their teenage years—whether going out with friends or exploring romantic relationships. The parents of the suburban adolescents may be faced with teens who feel estranged from them due to the prioritization of earning a higher income over spending time together as a family.

The Importance of Caring Adults

While these young people discussed experiencing many difficulties in their relationships with adults, the adolescents in particular also identified what they considered to be a significant consequence of not having an adult you can count on—you have to rely on your peers. One participant summed up this view in the statement, “When adults let you down, you turn to peers.” Another girl said, “My mother never believes anything. I basically talk to my friends a lot.” One teen went so far as to suggest that the difficulties experienced by one of his friends, which included criminal charges, were directly connected to the absence of his friend’s parents, “Because when he was growing up and she [his mother] always neglected him and he would go to his friends.” While peers may provide additional social support, adults provide guidance and structure that these youth deemed essential to healthy emotional development during adolescence.

Discussion

The youth who participated in these focus groups unambiguously expressed both a need and a desire for caring relationships with adults and a clear sense that adults who cared could offer safety and opportunities for growth that relationships with other young people could not provide. But, as they pointed out, good relationships between young people and adults do not just happen—they take time and work, and they require the active engagement of *both* participants. Their experiences highlight both the importance and power of being cared about by an adult simply for “being who you are.” Their comments also point to the multiple pressures and constraints parents face as they raise their children within particular contexts.

Repeatedly, these young people drew distinctions between relationships in which they felt respected and listened to by adults and those in which they did not. Demonstrating respect for young people, engaging with them authentically, and actively listening to them are actions that contribute to, and are a part of, developing mutual respect in adult-child relationships. A key element of mutual respect was the

adult’s capacity and willingness to allow the child to have a direct and open impact on him or her or to shape their relationship with each other. This openness encouraged the youth to bring themselves more fully into relationship. These young people stressed that relationships with adults based on mutual respect provide psychological safety and opportunities for growth and learning.

The essential elements of good relationships with adults identified by the youth in these groups were quite similar to those of the growth-fostering relationships delineated by relational-cultural theorists (Jordan, 1986; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997). In this framework, psychological health is thought to be the outgrowth of participation in mutually empathic relationships with others (Jordan, 1989; Jordan & Dooley, 2000; Miller, 1988; Miller & Stiver, 1994, 1995). Mutuality, or the active participation, authentic engagement, and responsiveness of both partners forms the core of these relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997), and each individual develops a sense of relational competence (Jordan, 1999). These findings indicate that further examination of the potential that Relational-Cultural Theory may hold in this area of research is warranted.

Unfortunately, many of the young people in these groups expressed having a desire for strong and confiding relationships with adults which seemed beyond their reach. Concern about the lack of access to supportive adults, due to increasingly fragmented families, the erosion of neighborhood ties, and the time demands of work for both adults and youth has been raised (Freedman, 1993; Steinberg, 1999). Participants in all of these groups spoke directly to this paucity in their own lives. Despite the framing of the protocol questions around what constitutes a good relationship, the pull was overwhelming toward describing what got in the way of having such a relationship with an adult, particularly with their parents. This may be partially due to the fact that these groups offered what may have been a rare opportunity for these young people to talk with adult facilitators about what is difficult in their relationships with important adults.

We were also concerned by the sense that some of the youth had simply given up on trying to talk with the adults in their lives. It seemed evident in the young people’s comments that many different factors contributed to parents in particular having a difficult time fully engaging with them. Contributing to these challenges to connection were the parents’ unrealistic expectations of the young people and of themselves as parents, difficulty listening without reacting, and

simply not taking the time necessary to build strong connections. While these young people had much to offer in the way of suggestions to improve these relationships, it seemed unlikely that they would talk directly with the adults in their lives about what could be done differently. This raises the possibility that adults may need more avenues for learning about what youth want and need in their relationships with adults. Even adults who have the desire to build good relationships with young people may not necessarily know how best to go about creating them. These findings also highlight the importance of adults listening empathically and being impacted by what they learn from and about the young people. An active sense of mutual respect is at the heart of these growth-fostering relationships.

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² The two theoretical frameworks most commonly used are attachment theory (e.g., Rutter, 1978, 1979) and Bandura's (Bandura, 1982) theory of self-efficacy (e.g., Masten, 1994). For a more detailed discussion of the limitations of these frameworks for this area of research see Spencer, 2000.

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Appendix

Focus Group Question Guide

Introduction:

Thirty years of research has shown that young people who have a close and supportive relationship with at least one adult have more balanced and psychologically healthy lives than those who do not. There is a group of researchers who are very interested in learning more about this important and powerful finding and, as a way to begin their work, they wanted to come directly to the real experts—people who are young people themselves—to learn more about this finding and to learn from you what you think this connection is all about. We are interested in your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and ideas and want to know what you *really* think about this subject.

I. What is a good relationship with an adult?

Probe Questions –

How do you (or would you) know when you have one? (e.g., what are the characteristics, what does one feel like, what does a bad or non-supportive relationship look like, feel like?)

Describe an adult that you have a good relationship with. What is he or she like?

What makes your relationship with him or her good?

- ◆ Is there anything in particular he or she does that makes this relationship good?
- ◆ Is there anything that you do?
- ◆ Why do you think close relationships with adults are important?

- ◆ What does a close relationship with an adult provide that is different from a relationship with someone your own age?
- ◆ What can these relationships lead to?
- ◆ What can be barriers to good relationships with adults?
- ◆ What facilitates or fosters good relationships with adults?

II. Some people have said (and maybe people in this group have mentioned) that listening is an important part of close relationships with adults.

Probe Questions –

- ◆ What do you think about this?
- ◆ What is good listening? Tell a story about an adult that listened to you well.
- ◆ What is bad listening? Tell a story about an adult that listened to you poorly.
- ◆ In general, do you think young people are listened to?
- ◆ If not, why do you think that is?
- ◆ What would have to happen for this situation to change?