CONNECTING, COLLABORATING, AND CONTRIBUTING: SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONAL SKILLS FOR THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

UCLA
Center for
the Developing
Adolescent

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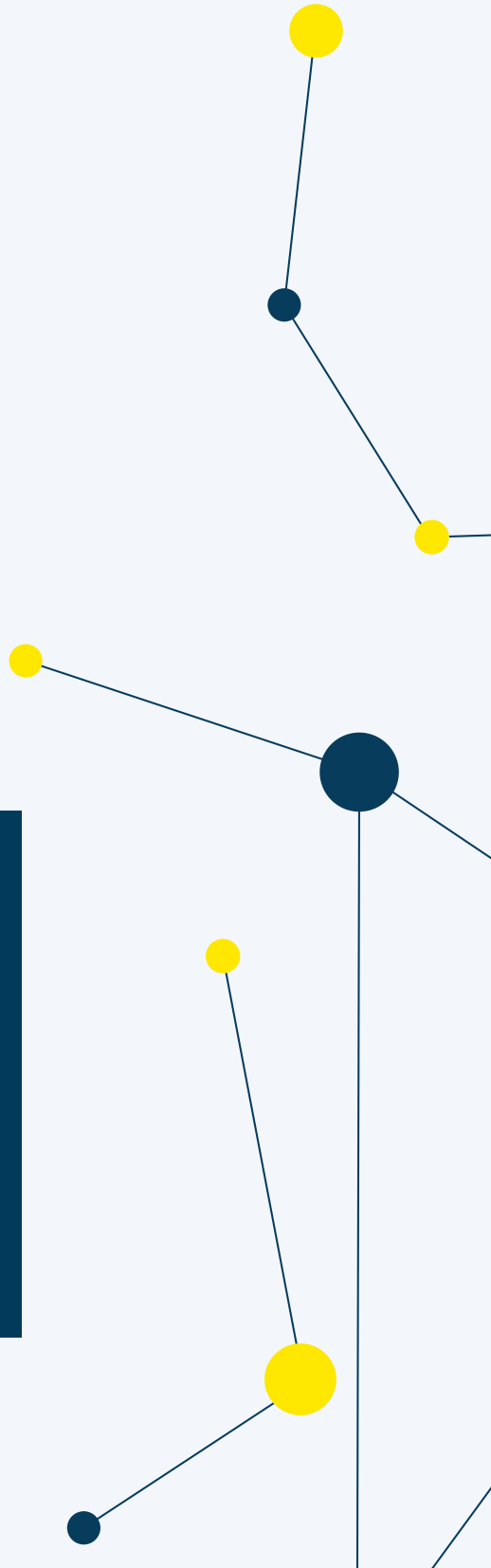
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Connecting, Collaborating, and Contributing: Supporting the Development of Relational Skills for the Transition to Adulthood

For any of us to create a successful, meaningful life, we need skills to connect, engage, communicate, resolve conflicts, and participate in our community. These *relational skills* are built through real-world practice. Adolescence, approximately ages 10 to 25, is a window when we are developmentally primed to seek out and learn from the experiences that help us build and strengthen these skills. The opportunities we provide for young people to develop these skills can lay the foundation for a successful transition to adulthood for youth and a thriving society for us all.

Relational Skills Are Essential—and In Demand

Relational skills are the skills that help us to understand and to connect, communicate, and collaborate with other people (Box 1). These include foundational social and interpersonal skills, such as reading social cues and participating in polite conversation, but also involve deeper skills critical to navigating relationships: building trust, regulating emotions, managing conflict, and providing support to others. Developing these relational skills enables us to foster and maintain healthy relationships with other people, from our neighbors to our closest family members, and lays the foundation for thriving communities.



In addition to benefiting our social well-being, there is also evidence that relational skills are valued in the labor market. Even as artificial intelligence (A.I.) becomes more embedded in the workplace, the job market is increasingly demanding (and rewarding) relational skills.[1,2] As technology takes on more cognitive tasks previously performed by human workers, relational skills are even more highly valued in the modern workplace. Employers are increasingly prioritizing relational skills in hiring.[1,3] In surveys, workers themselves cite "social and interpersonal abilities" more frequently than other skillsets as the most valuable for career advancement.[4]

Crucially, these skills also translate across industries and careers, an important consideration as changing labor markets require more frequent pivots from workers. These pivots require workers to not only find new jobs, but also to navigate uncertainty with new people in new workplaces—all challenges that require relational skills that enable workers to adapt as technology and markets shift.[5]

Adolescents are coming of age today in a world of economic uncertainty and rapid technological change (Box 2).[6] These societal shifts add further challenges to the already challenging task of transitioning into adulthood. Additionally, decreases in the availability of "third spaces"[7] where youth can socialize have resulted in fewer opportunities for young people to practice relational skills outside of their home or school environments. Together, these societal challenges highlight the importance of providing young people the opportunities and support that will help them thrive in a rapidly changing world. While relational skills alone cannot overcome all of these societal challenges, programs and policies that provide adolescents with opportunities to build relational skills have the potential to promote their career advancement, benefit their emotional, physical, and mental health, and ultimately support their transition to adulthood.

BOX 1

Relational Skills

In order to succeed in our personal lives and at work, we must learn how to navigate the complex networks of adult relationships. ***Relational skills* are the skills that enable us to understand and to connect, communicate, and collaborate with other people.** Some examples of relational skills include being able to:

- Build and repair trust with others
- Listen and consider others' points of view and ideas
- Regulate and express our emotions
- Resolve conflict and misunderstandings constructively
- Set and respect healthy boundaries
- Support others through difficulties
- Identify emotions in ourself and others and respond appropriately
- Communicate ideas and feelings effectively
- Collaborate with individuals and groups
- Adapt behaviors depending on context (e.g., social gathering versus work setting)
- Navigate social norms and nuanced social situations
- Be dependable and trustworthy
- Demonstrate respect



Late Adolescence: A Promising Window for Developing Relational Skills

Adolescence, approximately ages 10 to 25, is a window of flexibility in which the brain is especially *plastic* or adaptable, actively building and refining neural connections in response to experience.[8] **During late adolescence, approximately ages 16 to 25, formative life experiences interact with the heightened plasticity of the adolescent brain to create a pivotal window to refine the relational skills that serve us throughout our lives.**

In late adolescence, young people are generally expected to acquire more agency and increasingly adult roles and responsibilities. This transition is often accompanied by many new experiences—for instance, navigating a workplace, moving out of the family home, living with roommates, or developing a serious romantic relationship for the first time.[9] These transitions often involve moving from more structured and scaffolded relationships—such as with teachers or parents—to more varied connections and expectations from others—such as bosses, coworkers, or neighbors. These are all an expected and normative part of developing into a young adult.

Meanwhile, some of the brain connections that undergo the most change during adolescence are those that support a wide range of cognitive and emotional capacities involved in social interactions, bolstering our ability to understand the complex feelings, perspectives, and needs of other people.[10] These neural connections are built and refined through the everyday experiences, both positive and negative, that we have with others.[11] In turn, these more refined connections enable us to navigate novel and complex social dynamics.[10]



How Brain Development Supports Relational Skill Building in Adolescence

Networks throughout the brain support a range of abilities that enable us to manage relationships. This includes, but is not limited to, complex thinking, awareness of the self and others, managing emotions, and cooperating productively.[10] Even relatively routine interactions with other people are multifaceted, dynamic, and often unpredictable, requiring us to implement multiple skills instantaneously—for instance, processing faces and language, observing and taking actions, understanding how others may think, and making quick decisions. Engaging in these kinds of varied and interactive interactions requires the networks connecting diverse brain regions to be as efficient as possible.

Regions and networks in the brain that support these social abilities begin developing in infancy, but these networks continue to refine during late adolescence. In fact, some of the areas of the brain that mature latest are in the network of regions involved in recognizing, understanding, and interpreting social cues from others.[10] This significant brain development throughout adolescence and early adulthood promotes more complex learning, skill acquisition, empathy, and prosocial behaviors. During this sensitive developmental period of adolescence, young people are especially attuned to social context, building social connections, learning to care about and respond to others, and developing a clearer sense of identity, competence, and confidence.[12] This kind of learning occurs through our interactions with other people—not just our peers, but also the adults in our lives, including our parents, grandparents, and teachers.[11]

Fine-tuning the "social brain" based on experience. During the late adolescent period, our brains continue to refine and develop in response to experience. Brain development during adolescence involves forming new connections between neurons (brain cells) and pruning away those that are unneeded. This developmental process is informed by our experiences, tailoring the brain and enabling it to be specialized for the environment that it is in.[11] During adolescence, there is also increased myelination of neurons, a process that enables neurons to transmit information more efficiently (Figure 1).[13,14]

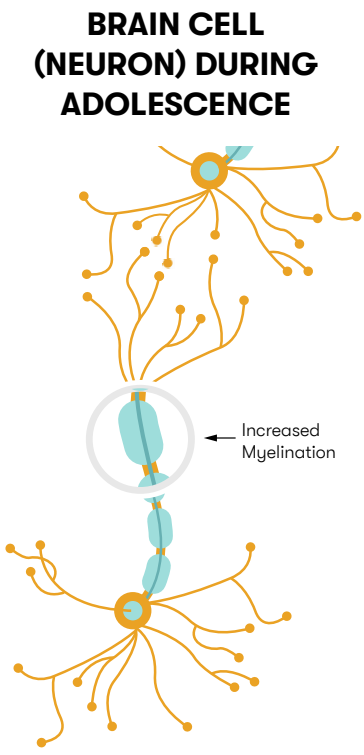


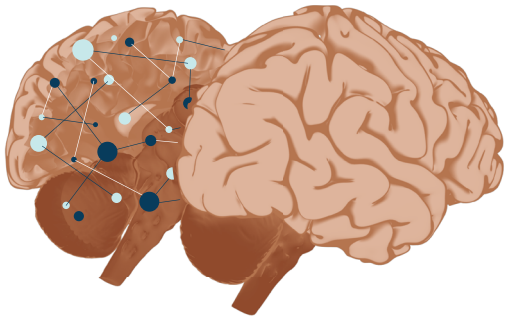
Figure 1

Throughout later adolescence and the transition to early adulthood, networks throughout the brain become more integrated, supporting more efficient communication across distant regions of the brain via functional networks.[15] In turn, this ongoing brain development enables us to learn the nuances of different social contexts and helps prepare us for more complex adult relationships.[10,11]

The development of social competence requires us to learn to balance goals related to our own wants and needs with the wants, needs, and

goals of others.[16] This learning is supported by changes in our brain during adolescence that make us more attuned to social cues.[10] This increased attention, combined with increasing exposure to a wider range of environments, helps us build the ability to navigate complex interactions, understand the needs and perspectives of others, and form more meaningful relationships.[11,17] For example, adolescents increasingly use social information strategically and adaptively as they try to determine which people can offer useful knowledge or are most in need of or deserving of our attention and support, whether in academic, work, or personal situations. These choices often depend on several factors, including the person's closeness or distance as a friend, social status among peers, perceived expertise on the topic, and need for assistance.[18,19] These behaviors are learned through experience over time, through making mistakes (and having successes) and learning from them, and they establish strong roots for the complex relational skills that are necessary for navigating adult situations.

As adolescents experience and learn from more social situations and interactions, the related brain systems become more fine-tuned, causing long-term changes in how these social brain networks are built and how they work. As our brains move toward adult maturity, there is a trade-off between flexibility and specialization of their circuits. When the brain prunes away underutilized neural connections, it enhances performance on familiar tasks but also reduces the ease and speed with which we learn new tasks. This helps explain why adults can find it more challenging to acquire new skills, such as mastering a foreign language, and why late adolescence is such an important window for learning the skills that are so critical to a successful adult life.[11]



Late adolescence as a window of opportunity for mitigating the effects of earlier adversity. All young people need support to develop the relational skills necessary for a healthy transition to adulthood, but young people who have experienced earlier adversity may have steeper hills to climb. Significant stress stemming from adversity experienced earlier in life, such as abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence, can affect the development of networks within the brain that enable us to interpret social cues and regulate our emotions.[20] These abilities play an important role in learning to trust other people, and then learning whether to trust someone again after they have broken our trust—skills that continue to develop during adolescence and are integral to maintaining healthy relationships.[21,22] Fortunately, late adolescence is a time in which the brain continues to develop in response to experiences, presenting a window of opportunity during which positive experiences can mitigate the effects of earlier adversity and lay the foundation for a thriving adulthood.[13]

When adolescents are provided safe, secure, enriching opportunities to explore and collaborate with others, their relationships with adults serve as roots that support them as they grow and develop the self-regulation, executive function, and behavioral skills that enable them to thrive into adulthood.[23]

How We Can Support the Development of Relational Skills in Late Adolescence

Because relational skills develop through repeated opportunities to practice in real-world settings, all systems, institutions, and environments that shape young people's lives have a role to play in fostering their growth. Importantly, research suggests when young people are given the support to develop relational skills in one context, the adaptations can carry over to others, enabling success in environments that pose new and different challenges.[24,25] Schools, families, community organizations, workplaces, and public policies can each create conditions that offer adolescents a web of supportive relationships and provide them with consistent opportunities to build trust, collaborate, and navigate relationships across multiple contexts.[13] Together, these experiences can support the development of the relational skills needed for healthy transitions to adulthood.

Following are a sampling of approaches that research suggests could be effective in promoting relational skills in youth.

- **Collaborative learning.** The ability to collaborate with other people is a key relational skill and is routinely listed as one of the skills most desired by employers.[26] Programs geared towards older adolescents should strategically incorporate opportunities for collaboration and connection with peers or colleagues. In schools, collaborative learning activities, group projects, and classroom discussions are ways in which adolescents can gain academic knowledge while developing important relational skills such as communication, cooperation, and empathy.[11] Such activities are most effective when group composition is carefully managed to ensure that members bring complementary skillsets to the project and all participate fully.[27]

- **Service learning and opportunities for contribution.** Service learning and other opportunities to contribute to one's community or a prosocial cause are promising



ways for adolescents to learn and practice a wide range of relational skills while feeling like a valued contributor. During adolescence, we become increasingly motivated to contribute to our communities, and contribution has been found to benefit mental and physical health in adolescents.[28] Prosocial activities can support healthy identity development as adolescents transition into adulthood by offering opportunities for them to feel socially recognized, appreciated, and capable of actions that benefit their community.[16]

Opportunities to contribute can help adolescents build relational skills by providing real-world practice in considering the needs and perspectives of others and working alongside others toward a common goal. Service learning programs have been found to promote leadership skills in adolescents, increase their desire to contribute to their community, and benefit social competence overall. These programs are most effective in benefiting adolescent development when adolescents are encouraged to reflect on their community service experience.[29,30]

- **Mentoring.** Programs that aim to promote relational skill development in adolescents may benefit from incorporating mentorship into their design.[31] For youth who have had challenging relationships

RECOMMENDATION

BOX 2

Technology and Relational Skill Development

Digital technologies such as social media and A.I. are changing how people connect with each other, but their effects on relational skills are complex[43] and not yet fully understood. Online interactions, including through social media or online gaming, are qualitatively different from in-person interactions in many ways—for instance, they tend to involve fewer nonverbal social cues or facial expressions—and may not, therefore, be ideal environments in which to build relational skills. On the other hand, online spaces offer adolescents expanded opportunities to connect, communicate, and build community—experiences that could ultimately benefit their overall relational skill development.[44] Moreover, online spaces can also connect those who might otherwise feel isolated, including people who feel separated geographically or marginalized in other ways, such as immigrants or people with disabilities.[39] The more online spaces encourage social connection, communication, and cooperation, such as through texting or video chatting with friends, sharing content, or playing video games that require cooperation, the more likely time spent using digital technology will have the potential to enhance rather than harm relational skill development.[45]

Similarly, new tools like A.I. companions show some promise for providing support for people who have little access to such support elsewhere in their lives. Yet A.I. chatbots can also reduce users' motivation to repair conflicts with others, create unrealistic expectations of constant availability and support, and eliminate friction and real vulnerability that help us learn how to collaborate and connect with other humans.[46]

To help parents, teachers, and those designing or regulating new technologies reduce harm and make the most of technology's positive potential, the American Psychological Association (APA) has created an extensive resource on artificial intelligence and adolescent well-being. It proposes a set of research-based recommendations that include:[47]

- Set and maintain healthy boundaries with simulated human relationships.
- Design A.I. systems that are likely to be accessed by adolescents with explicit consideration of the competencies, abilities, and vulnerabilities of adolescence.
- Empower parents and teachers to limit access to and engagement with harmful and inaccurate content.
- Implement comprehensive A.I. literacy education for adolescents and those who support and educate them.

For more detail, see www.apa.org/topics/artificial-intelligence-machine-learning/health-advisory-ai-adolescent-well-being

with adults in the past, including youth who have experienced foster care, mentoring relationships can be especially helpful in providing opportunities to build trust and communication skills, and to see relational skills including perspective-taking, conflict resolution, and emotion regulation modeled by mentors.[32,33] The benefits of mentoring on relational skill development depend on building a strong, trusting, and consistent relationship between the mentor and the young person, characterized by longer relationship length, greater involvement and closeness, and more frequent contact with the mentor.[34] Mentorship programs that prioritize consistency and closeness of mentoring relationships may therefore yield the strongest outcomes by enabling more frequent opportunities for mentees to build their relational skills and by fostering mentoring relationships characterized by reliability, reciprocity, and trust.

Programs that incorporate mentors of a similar age and background ("near-peers") can be particularly effective in cultivating relational skills in adolescents.[31] Moreover, mentorship experiences have been found to benefit the peer mentors themselves, who have an opportunity to practice leadership and communication skills as they support their mentees, suggesting that near-peer mentorship programs may yield positive outcomes for both mentees and mentors.[35,36]

In addition to fostering relational skills, adult and near-peer mentorships can be effective ways to help youth build their social capital. Notably, a stronger, more diverse network of relationships and connections has been shown to support young people's educational attainment, work readiness skills, and opportunities for career advancement and promotion.[37] These connections may be especially important for adolescents from marginalized communities, who may not have access to the range of social connections that can support their educational and career pathways. Programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters is one organization doing this mentoring work. "Bigs"

PROGRAM INSIGHT

From Classmates to Colleagues: Centering Relational Skills in Professional Skills Training

Relational skills are increasingly valued in the labor market, both in terms of hiring and career advancements.[14] Investing in job training and career-building opportunities that also support relational skills can promote long-term economic success in young people as they transition into adulthood, even in the face of macroeconomic uncertainty and technological change. These job training opportunities should go beyond developing technical skills by promoting relational skills such as workplace communication and collaboration.[48]

Program Highlight: Year Up United

Year Up United is a federally funded, national program for young adults aged 18 to 24 that begins with six months of intensive training on relational skills for success at work, including workplace culture, communication, and professional behavior, and specific job skills such as information technology and finance. The program integrates social support into its design through peer learning communities, staff advisors, social workers, and outside mentors. Training is followed by six-month internships, often at Fortune 500 firms, with ongoing support from Year Up mentors.[49]

In a seven-year study, which included the COVID-19-related economic downturn, researchers found that Year Up participants earned on average nearly $8,000 (28 percent) more per year than a control group. As a result, participants also experienced less housing insecurity, debt, and reliance on public benefits,[49] indicating greater financial stability during their transition to adulthood. This program provides an example of a design that centers relational skill development in workplace preparation training and, in doing so, has demonstrated promising economic outcomes for young people as they transition into adulthood.

create relationships that provide support, challenge growth, and expand possibilities for their "Littles" in ways that help them pursue education and career goals.

Support for mentors is a critical component of effective mentoring programs, particularly those serving youth who have experienced emotional trauma, damaged relationships, and forced separation from loved ones. Experiences of trauma may alter a person's ability to regulate their emotions and respond to perceived threats, which can complicate their ability to form a close mentoring relationship.[32] In these circumstances, it is important to train mentors in a trauma-informed approach to relationship-building.[38]

The Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring provides useful information and resources for programs working to incorporate mentorship into their design.

- **"Social infrastructure" in communities.** As a 2025 report from the World Health Organization states, "Communities are the heart of social connection: they are where people live, work, learn, play, and age. Community strategies can create more chances for people to connect."[39] For adolescents in particular, community programs and services can provide a safe space to practice agency, explore self-identity, and interact with a wider group of people.[39] In doing so, these spaces offer young people opportunities to cultivate and practice relational skills outside of the structured environments of home or school. Unfortunately, the number of community spaces for young people, often called "third spaces" because they offer a place to be outside of home and school, have been declining,[7] particularly in areas that are rural, have a majority Black population, or have lower rates of formal education.[40]



These spaces can include community centers, parks, libraries, cafes, gyms, skate parks, and other public spaces. Community leaders can improve social infrastructure

by focusing on third spaces in many ways, such as by:[41]

- Ensuring equally available and easy-to-access public spaces in all neighborhoods, within walking distance or near public transportation.
- Designing public spaces to encourage social interaction and inclusion, where youth are not asked to leave, but are instead welcome and encouraged to spend time.
- Investing in programs like sports, arts, recreation, and volunteering that provide positive activities for youth.
- Involving youth in planning to help ensure that these spaces meet their real needs and work for everyone.

In addition to these considerations for promoting relational skill development, all programs and policies concerning youth ages 16 to 25 should take into account the key developmental needs of adolescence. Programs and policies are likely to be most effective when they are designed to align with the developmental needs of late adolescence—for example, by providing opportunities for agency, contribution, and guided exploration alongside meaningful relationships with peers and supportive adults. Integrating insights from the developmental science of late adolescence into program and policy design and philanthropic strategy can create the developmental conditions in which relational skills are most likely to develop and be sustained into adulthood.[42]

Relational Skills Need Support in a Changing World

A number of global issues, including economic uncertainty, climate change, and rapid technological change have introduced distinct challenges for young adults coming of age today.[6] Other changes over the past several decades, including less unsupervised time for adolescents[50] and fewer "third spaces"[7] where youth feel safe to interact with others outside of home or school, have decreased opportunities to practice relational skills in the course of a regular day. Together, these challenges and societal changes increase the need to design programs and policies that ensure that young people have the support and experiences they need to thrive. While relational skills alone cannot overcome all of these societal challenges, efforts to provide adolescents with opportunities to build relational skills have the potential to promote their career advancement, benefit their emotional, physical, and mental health, and ultimately equip them with the tools they need to navigate a rapidly changing world.

Learning relational skills is crucial for engaging with the world as a citizen, employee, friend, leader, and community member. To help today's (and tomorrow's) young people build the relational skills they need to successfully transition to adulthood, we must provide more opportunities for adolescents to collaborate and contribute to the world around them—and to have their contributions recognized and appreciated in order to build a sense that their efforts matter.[16]

For societies to thrive now and in the future, it is critical to support the healthy development of relational skills as adolescents transition into adulthood.

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