

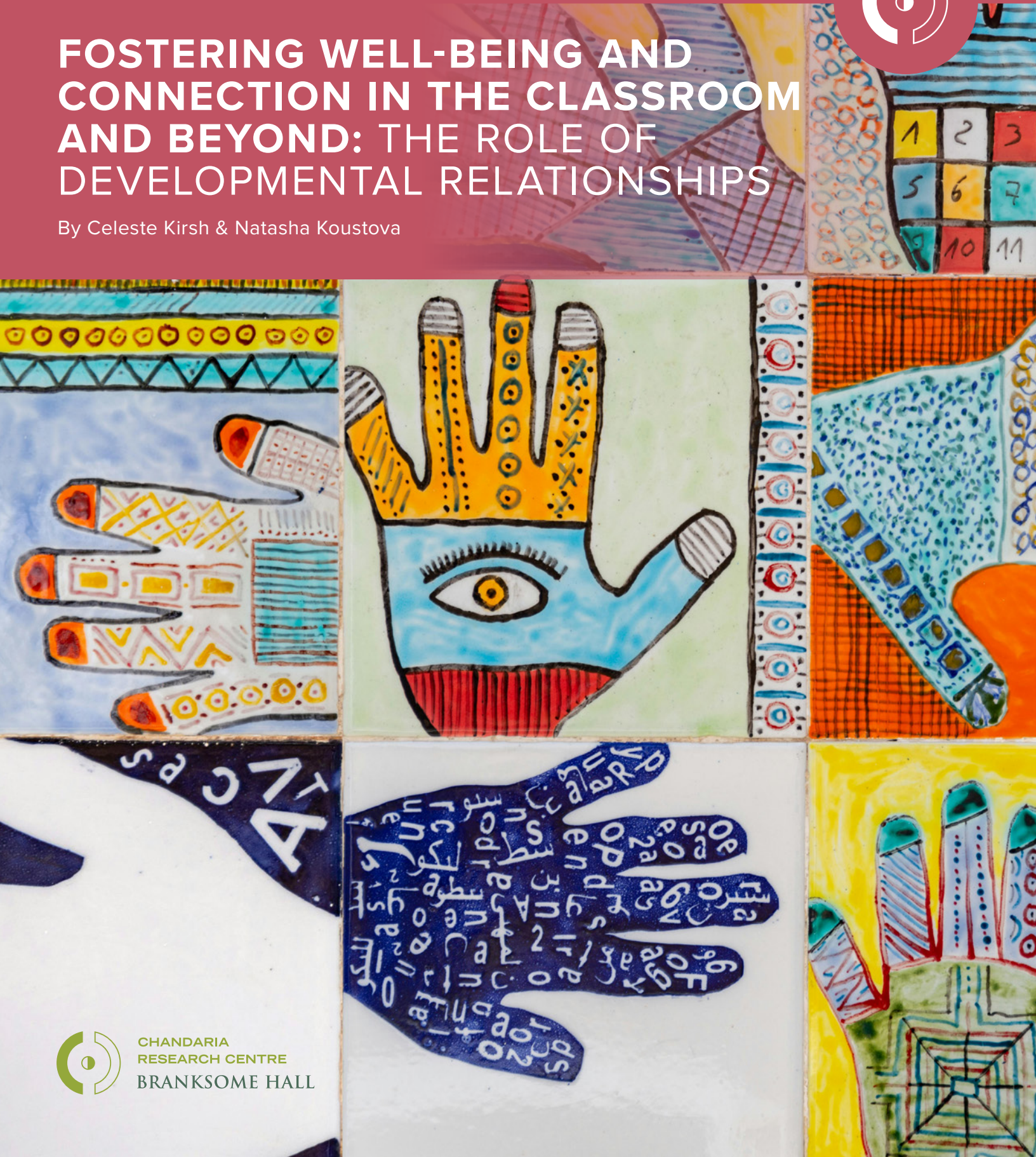
RESEARCH BRIEF

Chandaria Research Centre



FOSTERING WELL-BEING AND CONNECTION IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND: THE ROLE OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

By Celeste Kirsh & Natasha Koustova



Fostering Well-Being and Connection in the Classroom and Beyond:

The Role of Developmental Relationships



By Celeste Kirsh & Natasha Koustova

This research brief explores the concept of *developmental relationships*: reciprocal, caring interactions between adults and youth that evolve over time and gradually transfer power to the young person. Drawing on the Search Institute’s five-element framework (Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power and Expand Possibilities), this report synthesizes decades of research demonstrating how such relationships significantly impact youth well-being, academic motivation and social-emotional development. Using Branksome Hall’s 2024 School Climate survey results as a case study, the brief highlights local trends and insights, emphasizing key areas for growth including listening, navigating support and reframing failure. Practical strategies for fostering developmental relationships are outlined across classrooms, co-curricular spaces and whole-school environments. These are illustrated through selected examples from faculty that reflect some of the many relationship-centred practices already embedded in Branksome’s teaching culture, including creating an engaging classroom environment, using culturally sustaining pedagogy, scaffolding, mentoring, and being present outside of class. The brief documents how developmental relationships are not “nice-to-have” extras, but a foundational condition for thriving and for creating equity within schools and other youth-serving organizations.

WHAT ARE DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS?

There is no single better predictor of a young person’s ability to thrive than the quality of their developmental relationships (Houlberg et al., 2023). Based on years of both qualitative and quantitative research, Li and Julian (2012) originally coined the term *developmental relationships*. Simply put, it refers to ongoing, reciprocal interactions between an adult and youth; relationships that are caring, evolve over time and gradually shift power from the adult to the young person.

Building from Li and Julian’s (2012) seminal work, the Search Institute (Houlberg et al., 2023) has identified five elements of positive developmental relationships, broken down into twenty specific actions (refer to Figure 1 for a full list).

The Search Institute’s (2025b) Rooted in Relationships model uses a ginkgo tree to illustrate how young people thrive when their learning is grounded in relationship-rich environments. The roots, soil, bedrock and climate represent the relationships, relational space, organizational structures and broader societal contexts that shape their growth. When organizations create intentional, inclusive and equitable space, they provide fertile conditions needed for strong adult-child relationships to take root. As Houlberg and team (2023) note, thriving depends on the interaction of conditions within the broader ecosystem, and positive developmental relationships contribute not only to youth well-being but also to the health of the ecosystem itself.

Express Care	<p>SHOW ME THAT I MATTER TO YOU</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be dependable: Be someone I can trust • Listen: Really pay attention when we are together • Believe in me: Make me feel known and valued • Be warm: Show me you enjoy being with me • Encourage: Praise me for my efforts and achievements
Challenge Growth	<p>PUSH ME TO KEEP GETTING BETTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expect my best: Expect me to live up to my potential • Stretch: Push me to go further • Hold me accountable: Insists that I take responsibility for my actions • Reflect on failures: Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks
Provide Support	<p>HELP ME COMPLETE TASKS AND ACHIEVE GOALS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigate: Guide me through hard situations and systems • Empower: Build my confidence to take charge of my life • Advocate: Stand up for me when I need it • Set boundaries: Put limits in place that keep me on track
Share Power	<p>TREAT ME WITH RESPECT AND GIVE ME A SAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect me: Take me seriously and treat me fairly • Include me: Involve me in decisions that affect me • Collaborate: Work with me to solve problems and reach goals • Let me lead: Create opportunities for me to take action and lead
Expand Possibilities	<p>CONNECT ME WITH PEOPLE AND PLACES THAT BROADEN MY WORLD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspire: Inspire me to see possibilities for my future • Connect: Introduce me to people who can help me grow • Broaden horizons: Expose me to new ideas, experiences and places

Figure 1. Developmental Relationships Framework (Houlberg et al., 2023)

WHY ARE DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS IMPORTANT?

Over the last decade, research has consistently linked strong relationships between youth and adults with higher levels of social-emotional competence and academic motivation (Scales et al., 2022). For middle and high school students, improvement in all five developmental relationship elements was a strong predictor of improved perceptions of school climate (Scales et al., 2019). Moreover, improvements in all elements (other than Expand Possibilities) predicted higher academic motivation and improved perceptions of instructional quality; however, only improvements in Challenge Growth predicted higher year-end grade point average (Scales et al., 2019). In addition to academic outcomes, high quality relationships with adults outside of the family have been found to support the development of positive values, self-perceptions and attitudes that enhance the effects of schools and other programs (Li & Julian, 2012; Scales et al., 2006). More specifically, positive developmental relationships have been shown to increase hope, positive identity and sense of purpose (S. Schwartz et al., 2013), and to reduce depression and enhance spiritual development (K. Schwartz et al., 2006) in young people. Thomas and colleagues (2013) found positive adult-youth relationships reduced alcohol, tobacco and drug use. Similarly, a longitudinal study in Switzerland showed that students with positive teacher relationships in late elementary school had fewer behaviour problems both at the time and up to four years later (Obsuth et al., 2018). Given this evidence, it is difficult to ignore the crucial role of positive developmental relationships for young people.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS?

In both school and extracurricular programs, adults are twice as likely as youth to report the presence of strong developmental relationships (Boat et al., 2021; Search Institute, 2020).

This finding sheds light on how difficult it can be for the adults designing and implementing programs to fully understand whether they are having the desired impact on young people. Students in high school also experience fewer developmental relationships than in other divisions (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017; Scales et al., 2019). Bergin and Bergin (2009) argue that this is perhaps because, on the whole, “... secondary schools are not designed for belongingness” (p. 157). In this context, students tend to have multiple teachers and larger classes, with a stronger emphasis on discipline, instruction and achievement than on relationships (Spilt & Koomen, 2022). Developmental relationships also get worse over the course of the year in most school settings, demonstrating the challenges of relational sustainability (Scales et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020). And while nine out of ten adults in youth-focused institutions report that they value a relationship-rich culture, between 25%–41% of staff and leaders said that relationships are often overlooked or undervalued as a topic for professional development (Houltberg et al., 2023).

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DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS AT BRANKSOME HALL

In November 2024, Branksome Hall administered the Developmental Relationships survey as part of the larger School Climate survey to 571 students in Grades 4–12, yielding a 75% response rate. The overall score for Developmental Relationships between teachers and students was 65, which is considered *moderate*, where a score of 67 is the threshold for high quality relationships.

In general, students felt that teachers were excellent at expressing care, challenging growth and sharing power, and moderate at providing support and expanding possibilities (see Figure 2). In follow-up focus groups, students suggested that their biggest areas of challenge—where teachers could focus to improve relationships quickly—involved teachers listening to students, helping them navigate the institution (and the IB) more effectively, and helping them reflect on failure in ways that reduce perfectionism.

DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS (DR) SURVEY RESULTS

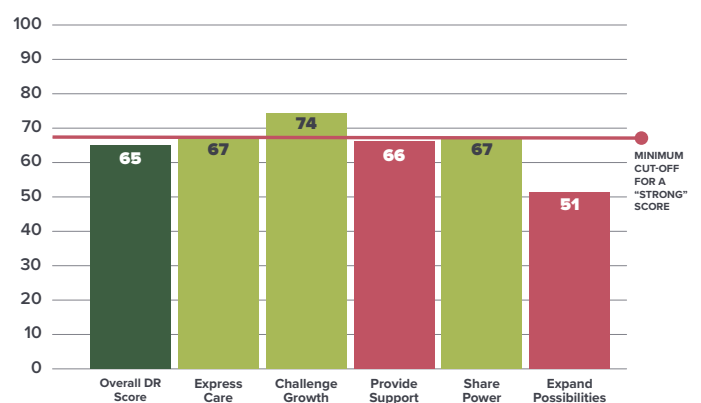


Figure 2. Results of Developmental Relationships survey at Branksome (November 2024)

Note. Dark green represents the overall average. Categories in the strong range are shown in light green; categories in the moderate range are in pink.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO CULTIVATE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

It is important to acknowledge that developmental relationships are dynamic and shift as young people grow and move through different contexts and stages of life (Rubin & Chung, 2006). What is important for a student in Junior Kindergarten learning the norms and routines of the classroom will be vastly different than what a 16-year-old will need from the adults in her life when deciding where to apply for post-secondary education (Houltberg et al., 2023). Nevertheless, research points to concrete and demonstrable actions that adults can adopt in order to foster developmental relationships in their work with young people and

to make the value of relationships in their practice more transparent. The following section illustrates practical ways educators can bring to life the elements and actions of developmental relationships across classroom, co-curricular and broader school

contexts. The examples highlighting practices from specific individuals represent just a few of the many effective and relationship-focused practices already embedded in Branksome's teaching culture.



IN CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS

- **Maximize class time to engage with students:**

Teachers who are prepared for learning at the start of each class and spend a minimal amount of time on management activities during class (attendance, passing out papers, collecting homework) have students who are more engaged (Pianta et al., 2012). A simple routine that helps to support this includes a daily check-in questions that many teachers employ. For example, in the Senior School, Charlotte Grainger takes attendance by asking students low-stakes, light-hearted questions such

as “What is your favourite noodle shape?” While she is sorting out who is present and who is absent, the questions allow her to get to know her students, listen attentively to what they share and have points to follow up on individually when needed.

- **Greet students at the door:** Teachers in primary and junior contexts at Branksome have long been greeting students as they enter the classroom. Research from Collins and Landrum (2023) shows that this strategy helps create a positive start to the day, but also suggests that its’ effectiveness is not limited to younger students.

Greeting students at the door in middle and high school was found to help students initiate school tasks more quickly (Allday et al., 2013) and reduce disruptive behaviours (Cook et al., 2018). This strategy is reliant on educators optimizing their own routines to ensure that there is something for students to do when they enter the classroom. Students should be trained on the norms and routines of entering a classroom without immediate teacher direction (Pianta et al., 2012). Similarly, Ødegård and colleagues (2025) found that when teachers stay behind after class to allow students to talk and connect, they provide a simple way to listen to students and create space for relationship-building.

- **Use the Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) method (Cook et al., 2019):**

- **Establish:** Spend intentional non-instructional time with students;
- **Maintain:** Keep a 5:1 ratio of positive to corrective interactions;
- **Restore:** Use teacher-initiated restorative communication to repair harm after conflict.

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- **Use dialogue journals:** Students use regular, low-stakes journaling prompts that explore feelings, experiences or classroom feedback, and teachers express care by closely reading and thoughtfully responding in ways that show they understand and value each student's ideas (Chan & Aubrey,

2021). This strategy not only builds rapport but also provides a structured way for teachers to hear students' perspectives, making it especially effective for students learning English or those who are more introverted.

- **Structure learning in small groups:** While commonplace in primary classrooms, restructuring learning so that students in all grades can learn in small groups creates meaningful opportunities for students to talk to each other (Pianta et al., 2012), and provides teachers with the time to connect, listen and be available for the happenstance moments that can foster connection (Ødegård et al., 2025).
- **Scaffold learning within a student's zone of proximal development (ZPD):** Vygotsky (1978) identified ZPD as the space between what a child can do on their own and what they can do with help from an adult or a more skilled peer. The adult responsively matches support to the child's needs, gradually shifting power and control as the child develops greater independence and competence within the relational context (Fisher & Frey, 2021; Li & Julian, 2012). For example, Candace Benedet's approach to building student confidence and mastery in Grade 10 Science aligns well with this scaffolding and fading approach: students learn new concepts and eventually teach these concepts to younger students in a Grade 5 TDSB classroom. Candace designs learning experiences that bridge the gap from initial inability to independent mastery, using supported practice to prepare students to teach the skill to others. In doing so, she both challenges students to reach their potential and shares power by positioning them as capable leaders.
- **Model and encourage reframing failures and setbacks:** *Perfectionism*, defined as holding exceedingly high standards for performance and being overly self-critical (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Frost et al., 1990) can be mitigated through reframing negative experiences (Stoeber & Janssen, 2011).

Teachers can model this explicitly for students by openly sharing some of their own missteps and demonstrating how to reframe these experiences as opportunities for growth (Singh, 2025). In addition, students formally interviewing an adult about how they have learned from failures is a simple strategy to help young people learn from others and understand the role that failure can play in growth (Search Institute, 2025a).

- **Use culturally sustaining pedagogies:** Research points to a strong positive correlation between students' perceptions of a culturally relevant and/or sustaining environment and higher levels

of academic motivation and developmental relationships (Boat et al., 2025). Teachers can foster a culturally responsive environment through simple changes such as incorporating a wide range of diverse texts. For example, the Grade 7 team included the novel *The Last Cuentista* (Higuera, 2021) to reflect the Latinx identity of many students. Other strategies include having students interview each other to appreciate their various backgrounds and using KWL (what do you *know*, what do you *want* to know, what have you *learned*) charts to ascertain the skills and knowledge students bring to learning a particular topic.



BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

- **Be a presence in the wider school environment:** To foster developmental relationships, young people benefit from experiencing adults interested in them as people, not just as learners. Teachers and mentors eating meals with students, playing sports during free time (Solberg & Laundal, 2025), or engaging with young people in hallways create informal opportunities to listen to students, notice

what matters to them and allow connections to naturally develop into meaningful relationships (Ødegård et al., 2025). Erika Lo intentionally positions herself in busy traffic areas in the Middle School to connect with students. She uses these moments to acknowledge something small but specific about them, such as sparking a conversation about a student's performance in So You Think You Clan Dance.

- **Make introductions:** It can be challenging for some students to navigate complex institutions like Branksome, especially when they are new. Rather than simply naming the supports available to students or listing resources on websites, adults can intentionally introduce students to people who have expertise in an area that may be useful to the student (Search Institute, 2025b).

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- **Mentor with youth needs in mind:** Morrow and Styles (1995) studied mentorship programs like Big Brothers/Big Sisters. They found that mentors who prioritized youth needs over their own, focused on fun, and involved youth in choosing activities developed stronger attachment and commitment from their mentees. Branksome’s Model United Nations Club (MUN), supervised by Daniel Brownson and Brendan Narancsik, has evolved over the years to do just this: older students act as leaders and mentors for the younger students who are newer to MUN. This means of sharing power gives both younger and older students meaningful opportunities to learn and grow together. Additionally, when students choose from serious geopolitical or whimsical pop culture conference topics, student agency is centred in powerful ways.

Clubs and co-curricular experiences can be spaces to foster these integral aspects of young people’s growth.



- **Centre fun and youth preferences:** Sharing power and expanding possibilities can be harder to include in many class contexts. In fact, these are the least commonly experienced elements of developmental relationships by young people (Pekel et al., 2015; Scales et al., 2019). Clubs and co-curricular experiences can be spaces to foster these integral aspects of young people’s growth. Here at Branksome Hall, the recent restructuring of our clubs program under the leadership of Dr. David Fournier, requiring student impetus and interest to launch a club, ensures that youth preferences are at the heart of this experience. After creating groups such as Balloon Club, Roller Coaster Design Club, Dance Club, and KPop Club, students can then take action and lead in ways that are enjoyable and meaningful to them. Moreover, when clubs include students from multiple grades (such as the Dungeons & Dragons Club), students can be introduced to a range of people who can help them grow.



SCHOOL LEADERSHIP LEVEL

- **Offer teacher supports:** Teachers require ongoing relational support themselves if they are expected to foster positive developmental relationships with students (Pianta et al., 2012). One possibility for embedding this support into professional learning is the Simple Interactions Foundations Training (2024). In this training, adult mentors are filmed interacting with young people and then engage in a conversation with a trained coach to identify their strengths and next steps (Akiva et al., 2022). Further, teacher evaluation should be determined not only by test scores and curriculum delivery, but also by the quality of their relationships with students. This can be measured through observed interactions and student feedback (Li & Julian, 2012) using a standardized, valid tool such as the CASEL Schoolwide SEL Walkthrough (2019).
- **Map student connections:** Division leads, teams of teachers or school administrators can facilitate a

dialogue and mapping exercise with all teachers to determine which young people might be slipping through the cracks and have not yet established relationships with adults in the school environment (Whedon, 2025).

- **Nurture adult wellness:** Teachers who are able to manage their own stress and be aware of their own emotional states have been found to respond more calmly to student needs and notice students' emotional cues more accurately (Wang, 2023). Even short amounts of time with yoga/ gentle movement and breathing practices, such as those in the Community Approach to Learning Mindfully (CALM) program, have been found to reduce teacher stress and improve distress tolerance (Harris et al., 2016). However, Emerson and team (2017) aptly point out that systemic issues adding to teacher stress, such as workload and working conditions, need to be addressed in order to cultivate teacher well-being.

Developmental relationships are fundamental to youth well-being, equity and lasting impact in educational and youth-serving organizations. The evidence is clear: these reciprocal, caring interactions, which gradually transfer power to young people, are the strongest predictor of a young person’s ability to thrive.

By intentionally implementing the Search Institute’s five elements (Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power and Expand Possibilities) across all levels of school, from classrooms to the broader community, educators can cultivate the relational climate needed for every student to grow and succeed. The Branksome Hall case study identified local challenges—including the need for greater listening and support in navigating institutions—that provide clear pathways for focused, practical improvements. Ultimately, fostering strong developmental relationships is not a supplemental activity, but foundational to helping young people thrive.

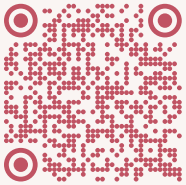
PROMPTS FOR REFLECTION

1. In your current role, how can you encourage, enrich and empower your relationships with students?
2. Think about two students you interact with regularly:
 - A. **The ‘Challenging’ Connection:** Who is the child who, for whatever reason, gets under your skin? You care about them, but you often feel at odds.
 - B. **The ‘Under-the-Radar’ Connection:** Who is the child you often overlook? The one who falls through the cracks.

For one week, make an intentional effort to connect with both students outside of academics. What do they care about? What makes them smile? How might you celebrate who they are, even in a small way?
3. Think about this week, or even the last month. What’s an interaction or a moment with another person that made your day? What might this reveal about the importance of relationships?
4. Consider a difficult interaction or relationship you have had with a young person. Describe the dynamic from the perspective of the young person using the Developmental Relationships Framework (Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power and Expand Possibilities). What helps to explain why this was a difficult interaction or relationship? What might have been done differently?
5. No matter what other roles you have in life, you are a support for someone. In order to be the best you can be, you also need support. Who are the people who provide relational support to you? What simple, daily interactions have you received to sustain and nourish you in your journey?

QUICK LINKS TO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

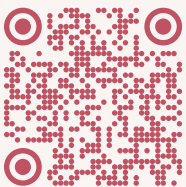
Simple Interactions Tool



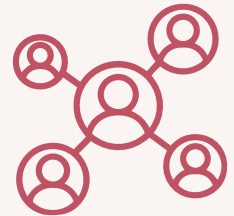
CASEL Schoolwide SEL Walkthrough Protocol



Community Approach to Learning Mindfully (CALM) Program



Student Relationship Mapping 101



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Dr. Celeste Kirsh is a teacher-researcher. Her work investigates relational writing pedagogies that foster joy and civic engagement. With over a decade of teaching experience in both the middle school and graduate level, she is passionate about bridging research and practice, making educational scholarship accessible through academic publications, podcasts, and professional learning initiatives.



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Dr. Natasha Koustova is a social psychology researcher whose areas of focus include cross-cultural values, beliefs and norms, positive youth development, and girl leadership and civic engagement. She brings her expertise in quantitative and mixed methods applied social research to advance the centre's research priorities in teaching and learning, student and faculty well-being, and empowering youth leaders to make a difference in the world.

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