Social and emotional skills go by many names – 21st century skills, soft skills, non-cognitive skills, and character – just to name a few. Regardless of what we call these skills, or whether we engage with youth in classrooms, on the basketball court or on the school bus, research and best practices suggest that students’ relationships with peers and caring adults are a key vehicle for learning critical life skills, like teamwork, communication, and coping with and expressing feelings.

However, many social and emotional learning programs and initiatives focus more on instruction and curricula than they do on relationships and mentoring. Research tells us that an integrated, intentional approach to social and emotional learning is best, but without specific information about the relationship-based strategies that best support students’ development, our social and emotional learning initiatives may continue to miss critical opportunities for connection and growth. This guide shares specific information about the relationship-based strategies, including mentoring, that show promise for cultivating social and emotional learning for young adolescents, both in school and in out-of-school time settings.

What are relationship-based approaches? They are practices that engage youth in caring relationships in order to provide opportunities for support, growth, and development. They include one-to-one mentoring programs that cultivate individual relationships between students and adult volunteers, and advisory groups that connect students with peers and a teacher or advisor to process experiences and practice new skills. They include group and
peer mentoring programs that connect youth with other students and caring adults, and can range from structured programs to more informal opportunities for youth and adults to connect. They can take place during the school day, or in an after-school or community-based program.

While relationships with parents and caregivers are generally considered the most important for young people’s social and emotional development, non-parental adults and peers also play a critical role...

This guide focuses specifically on relationship-based strategies for young adolescents in the middle grades. Young adolescence is a time of tremendous social and emotional growth, yet research and interventions specific to this unique developmental stage are sparse compared to those focusing on the elementary grades. Identifying specific relationship-based strategies that promote social and emotional learning for students in the middle grades will ensure that students receive the necessary supports to maximize their social and emotional learning potential and lay the foundation for healthy development and relationships as they grow, increasing their chances of future academic, career, and life success.

This guide summarizes the existing research findings about how relationships can help foster social and emotional development for young adolescents, and provides examples from the field that illustrate relationship-based practices that can be applied and scaled in schools, after-school programs, and community-based settings to enhance opportunities for social and emotional learning. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for school, district, and youth development practitioners, researchers, funders and policymakers, to help them identify solutions that can be customized in their communities. Ultimately, this guide seeks to help youth development professionals across settings understand the power of relationships to support students socially and emotionally, identify promising practices that can be scaled, and increase access to these supports for young adolescents in communities across the United States.

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS DURING EARLY ADOLESCENCE

Data collected from a large cross-section of middle school students surveyed about their experiences in school reveals that social connection matters tremendously at this developmental stage, but may be harder for students to attain than at other stages. Young adolescents in middle school report having weaker relationships with their teachers as well as lower ratings of their sense of belonging in school than both older and younger students. Simultaneously, the correlation between these indicators and student outcomes, including attendance, behavior, and course performance, is much stronger at this developmental stage. Just as students are reporting more disconnection from school and adult relationships than ever before, they need them more than ever before.

While relationships with parents and caregivers are generally considered the most important for young people’s social and emotional development, non-parental adults and peers also play a critical role, particularly as students grow and build relationships...
outside of the home. Research suggests that adults and peers model self-regulation skills and help young people understand social expectations in their communities⁶.

To maximize the potential of young people during early adolescence, experts recommend providing opportunities for youth to explore their interests, beliefs, and values in safe, supportive environments⁷. Relationships between youth and adults who take an interest in their strengths, interests, and beliefs provide an ideal foundation for the development of identity and self-confidence. Such relationships also support opportunities to engage in projects that challenge and engage youth personally and lay the groundwork for the development of agency, critical-thinking and problem-solving⁸.

According to the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research’s Foundations for Youth Adult Success Framework, developmental experiences are opportunities for young people to process and practice new skills essential for their development. These experiences are most effective when they occur in the context of social interactions with adults and peers⁹, and can be especially important for young people’s development of agency, or the confidence and ability to take action to influence the outcomes of their own lives, as they experience their own impact and value in social contexts⁹. Relationships with caring adults that support young people in reflecting upon, processing, and understanding their experiences in ways that influence identity development and connections to future opportunities are known as developmental relationships. The positive effects of such relationships are supported by a body of research pioneered by Search Institute¹⁰.
KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

To better understand the specific ways in which relationships facilitate social, emotional, and academic development for young adolescents, a systematic review of the existing research literature was conducted, on programming or interventions that engage middle school youth in intentional relationships with adults or peers, and their impact on social and emotional outcomes. Here are a few key findings from the literature review:

- Relationships affected a host of social and emotional outcomes for students, strengthening positive feelings towards school, future, and self.

- Relationships had a net positive effect on youths’ social and emotional skills, mental health, and identity development.

- Studies on culturally responsive mentoring programs found positive effects on participating students’ racial and cultural identities and attitudes.

- Students in mentoring relationships experienced a myriad of social and emotional benefits, including improved self-regulation, guidance around academic issues and future plans, and performance-based feedback. Researchers further found that social and emotional effects were achieved regardless of whether mentoring activities focused on academic subjects.

- Youth-adult interactions characterized by adult behaviors such as providing encouragement, tips, and modeling, guiding discussions and reflections, modeling healthy behaviors, giving meaningful feedback, and conveying unconditional positive regard tended to have a positive impact on social and emotional outcomes for students.

- Students who lacked strong existing relationships going into mentoring programs benefitted significantly more than peers with very strong or very negative existing relationships.

- Mentors’ ethnic identity affected youths’ ethnic identity; in one study, girls of color were more likely to explore their ethnic identities when their mentors did so.
CASE STUDIES: FOUR PROMISING MODELS

Four distinct approaches to integrating relationships with social and emotional learning for young adolescents in middle schools and after-school programs were explored in the guide. They illustrate various relationship-based models, including advisory groups, group, peer, and one-to-one mentoring, as well as models that combine these approaches. They take place in various settings – from classrooms during the school day, to after-school programs in school settings, to workplace settings where students gain exposure to career experiences. They also provide snapshots of different practices that programs can use to engage young adolescents in meaningful ways, such as culturally relevant activities, sharing circles, mindfulness exercises, and role-playing activities that facilitate skill-building. The four promising models featured included:

**Talking in Circles – An in-school, relationship-centered approach**

“Once you hear other people express their feelings and open up, you understand them better, and maybe you can do the same. You get closer to your classmates. You can connect to them.” – Nicole, sixth grader, A.P. Giannini Middle School

**Leaders, Big and Little – A combined group and one-to-one mentoring approach**

“Within the program I myself felt empowered by my fellow bigs. They had the power to effect change in other people, these girls. And I wanted to be a part of that.” – Christie, fourth-year student, University of Virginia

**Uniting Nations – A culture-focused mentoring approach**

“Having opportunities for kids to learn about their own identity builds their estimate of themselves, their self confidence. Having mentors who have the same background helps.” – Charlene Camillo, Learning Coordinator, Thames Valley District School Board

**Connecting the Dots – Mentoring approaches that show a success path from school to career**

“Through experiences with professionals in workplaces, we try and make a concrete link between the future students are imagining and today.” – Jim Schroder, Head of Program, Spark Program, Inc.

These diverse models illustrate a variety of relationship-based practices that support students socially and emotionally, while helping them build pathways to future college, career, and life success. These models also shared some common features, including providing targeted supports for both youth and adult mentors, acknowledging the importance of building social and emotional skills and supports for adults as they model healthy behaviors and build strong relationships with young people. They also made efforts to provide culturally aware and culturally relevant spaces for youth to process their daily lived experiences and connect with cultural traditions and beliefs, ideally with adults who shared their cultural identities. Finally, these models sought to engage youth holistically, focusing on many aspects of their development including but not limited to their academic success. These commonalities point toward common features of quality relationship-based social and emotional programming.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS, RESEARCHERS, POLICYMAKERS, AND FUNDERS

Based on the review of the research, policy, and practice fields dedicated to social and emotional learning and relationships, key recommendations emerged - for researchers, school, district and youth development practitioners, policymakers and funders - which highlight gaps and needs in the work that has been done to date, and ways that these fields can partner to find solutions.

FOR PRACTITIONERS
The following recommendations summarize some of the key insights from this research as they relate to the daily practice of professionals across school, after-school and community based settings:

• Get to know your students and their specific needs and assets.
• When developing programs, use models that harness the power of groups and peer identity for this developmental stage.
• Develop a program focused on leadership development.
• Develop programming that builds sense of belonging for students who may be vulnerable to isolation in school settings.
• Pair students with mentors or peer groups whose identities affirm their own, to help normalize and validate students’ cultural experiences and provide relatable role models.
• Provide tailored programming that affirms LGBTQI-GNC students.
• Support adult mental health, cultural competence, and ethnic identity in mentors, so they can adequately support youth.
• Provide mentors with specific coaching on how to offer unconditional positive regard, encouragement, consistent positive interactions, meaningful feedback, and fostering trust.
• Provide opportunities for small group interaction, and offer activities that foster understanding, belonging, and connectedness.
• Partner with local corporations and employers to build your school, district, or program’s capacity in these areas.
FOR RESEARCHERS
Here are some steps researchers can take to develop a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the social and emotional needs of young adolescents:

• Study the social and emotional competencies most relevant to early adolescence.
• Specifically study the impact of pairing strong, intentional mentoring with structured social and emotional skill-building opportunities.
• Expand traditional research definitions of social and emotional learning to emphasize the impact of culture, power, privilege, and discrimination on identity development and social and emotional development.
• Study the impacts of culturally relevant mentoring programs and relationships on students' racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, as well as skills and competencies for dealing with racial trauma.
• Include research measures related to less-studied aspects of identity such as LGBTQI-GNC identity and gender identity in future studies on the effectiveness of mentoring and social and emotional learning programs.
• Develop studies that identify the relationship between mentors' qualities, activities and practices, students' ratings of relationship quality, and students' social and emotional outcomes.
• Partner with schools, programs, funders and policymakers on projects that provide schools, districts and programs with quality measurement tools to assess students' perspectives on their experiences and ensure that the availability and quality of supportive relationships is included in these assessments.

FOR POLICYMAKERS AND FUNDERS
Policymakers and funders are positioned to support and initiate systemic changes that can promote positive social and emotional outcomes for young adolescents, including:

• Funding or advocating for funding for relationship-based approaches to social and emotional learning.
• Providing more dedicated attention and funds to the middle grades and early adolescence.
• Incorporating more licensure or endorsement requirements around understanding young adolescent learning and development for educators and administrators in the middle grades, and provide pathways for school and district professionals to engage in continuing education around relationship-building and social and emotional learning.
• Supporting the recommendations put forth by the Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, including greater cross-sector collaboration and partnerships between youth development organizations, schools and districts, providers of social and emotional learning programming, and grantmakers.
• Increasing awareness of existing local, state, and federal funding opportunities that can be leveraged to support relationship-based social and emotional programming for adolescents.
Please view the complete guide for a list references and endnotes.