

# A Qualitative Investigation of Youth-Adult “Connection” in Positive Youth Development

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## KEYWORDS

positive youth development, closeness, connection, youth-adult relationships

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

### DESCRIPTION

Youth need to feel connected to adults in order to thrive. However, little is known about the processes of these youth-adult relationships. This research study aims to better understand the individual and environmental attributes that promote young people’s sense of connection to significant adults.

Significant adults (SAs) are described as adults other than parents or guardians that youth can count on, who are there for them, believe in them, care deeply about them, inspire them to do their best, and influence the choices they make.

This study uses a mixed methods approach to examine the youth-adult connection using multiple lenses. It explores how youth describe closeness and connection, helps to understand young people’s experiences in well-connected and poorly connected relationships, and examines the specific roles that SAs play in the lives of youth.

### METHODOLOGY

This mixed methods study presents findings from the first wave of data in a longitudinal investigation.

In Phase 1, researchers recruited 289 youth between the ages of 11 and 18 from local schools and youth programs. Youth completed a screening survey which included demographic information, presence of and closeness to SAs, and various scales measuring relational styles and social support networks.

In Phase 2, the researchers chose to follow a subset of 40 youth for a period of 3.5 years. The participants were chosen to ensure a diverse sample. They had an average age of 13.9 years. They were 57% female, 78% White, 14% African American, and 5% Hispanic. Six youth qualified for a free or reduced school lunch.

Participants were then given a survey which included various psychosocial scales, most notably the Connection subscale of the Positive Youth Development Short Form questionnaire. They were then interviewed and asked about relationships with significant adults in their lives and with other adults with whom they do not have a close relationship. The youth also completed a visual

social network map and responded to several questions about their network.

Interviews were transcribed and coded. Researchers used multiple approaches to analyze the data: thematic analysis, mixed methods analysis, and case analysis. They explored how youth described closeness and connection, and examined outliers to further understand the complexities of connection.

### KEY FINDINGS

Several themes were identified as facilitating or impeding connection, including shared interests or personality characteristics and time spent together. However, these factors worked differently for different youth. Shared interests typically facilitate connection, yet can also cause disconnection if youth perceive that the adult is significantly less committed to those interests.

Another defining theme in youths' narratives was role expectations and role boundaries. Different contexts (school, community, family, neighbourhood, etc.) come with different expectations for relationships. Youth evaluate adults in relation to the context and related expectations, suggesting a developmental sophistication which may not be accounted for in present youth development models.

Youth who scored both high and low on connection reported close relationships with adults, but those relationships differed, especially in terms of how and by whom the interactions were initiated. For instance, some youth who reported lower levels of connection were willing to initiate interactions with adults but in a cautious or self-fulfilling way.

Even youth with characteristics that typically impede forming strong relationships, such as lower self-esteem or higher avoidance and anxiety in relationships, can develop very strong relationships with SAs.

Not all youth are looking to emotionally confide; some youth seek connections based on overlapping interests and/or personality and, to them, this is what being close means. This differs somewhat to how researchers have conceptualized closeness, which may have impeded how researchers understand connection.

The findings of this study support what is already known in the literature about youth-adult relationships, while deepening the understanding of when and how such relationships develop.

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## ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

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This study examines connection in youth-adult relationships from the youth's perspective. It highlights how shared interests and personality traits facilitate or impede connection, how interactions are initiated, and explores the influence of context and associated role expectations.

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### WHY THIS MATTERS

This study provides a wealth of information about connection in youth-adult relationships and indicates directions for future research. Furthermore, it exemplifies how to study a complex concept like connection through a mixed-methods approach. The study does not include practical tips for connecting with youth. However, it is possible to infer key behaviours from the case studies and excerpts.

“We approach connection as both an asset that youth *have* and a process in which they *engage*, a view that ultimately demands different and varied measurement tools.”

Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016, p. 61

### RECAP

Various individual and environmental attributes influence a young person's sense of connection in the context of youth-adult relationships. The complex nuances of connection are best analyzed with a mixed methods approach.

### APA CITATION

Futch Ehrlich, V. A., Deutsch, N. L., Fox, C. V., Johnson, H. E., & Varga, S. M. (2016). Leveraging relational assets for adolescent development: A qualitative investigation of youth-adult “connection” in positive youth development. *Qualitative Psychology*, 3(1), 59–78.