



“... the trusted adults in this study have a characteristic way of talking not telling, which means they provide the support, encouragement, role modeling, and practical assistance that young people need as they move toward adulthood in a low-key, direct, and equitable or nonhierarchical way” (p. 588).

The role of trusted adults in young people's social and economic lives

1. What is the research about?

This research examines the role of trusted adults during young people's transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Trusted adults are non-parental adults “with whom young people are willing to be vulnerable or whom they are willing to risk relying on” (p. 576). Research shows that these figures can provide motivational, emotional, and instrumental support to youth, particularly when they are entering adult roles.

This study explores how and why trusted adults are important to young people experiencing different levels of economic engagement. In particular, the authors are interested in what makes this relationship *developmentally appropriate* for youth as they make the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in six Australian communities (two urban, two regional, two rural).

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about a culturally and linguistically diverse group of youth aged 12-20. It includes young people experiencing different levels of economic engagement.

4. How was the research done?

This study uses data from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and a short demographic survey conducted with 70 youth. Participants were classified into three categories of economic engagement: engaged, at risk of disengaging, and disengaged. Risk was determined on the basis of risk factors and protective factors. The researchers were particularly interested in the experiences of youth who were disengaged or at risk of disengaging; as a result, they oversampled for this group.

The main limitation of this study is its small, non-representative sample. The authors note that the research does not differentiate between youth who have one or more trusted adults, only captures the relationship at one point in time, and does not include the perspectives of trusted adults.

5. What are the key findings?

Approximately two-thirds of participants spoke about a trusted adult, such as extended family, older friends, community members, and people in paid roles. Engaged young people were less likely to have a trusted adult than young people who were disengaged or at risk of disengaging. The authors identified three main findings about the role of trusted adults during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The first two insights apply to all young people, while the third varies according to young people's engagement/risk status.

a) Talking not telling.

Trusted adults “talk with young people rather than telling them what to do” (p. 582). Youth described conversations with trusted adults as low-key, direct, and enacted with equity. This way of relating is developmentally appropriate as it allows youth “to feel like an equal adult even if they are being guided toward adulthood” (p. 583).

b) Support, encouragement, and role modeling.

Trusted adults offer young people the support, encouragement, and role modeling they need as they transition to adulthood. Examples of decision-making and behaviour are developmentally significant at a time when young people are negotiating new roles and experiences.

c) Practical assistance varies by young people’s engagement/risk status.

Trusted adults provide practical assistance such as coaching or tutoring, assistance with resources, and helping youth out of difficult situations, but the extensiveness and impact of this assistance varies according to young people’s engagement/risk status:

- **Young people engaged in education/employment** receive ‘augmentative’ practical assistance in areas where they already have the support of others. This assistance becomes particularly significant at times of crisis or transition – situations which can adversely affect young people’s trajectories.

- **Young people disengaged from education/employment or at risk of disengaging** receive more extensive assistance that is aimed at addressing their engagement challenges. In this case, practical assistance has the potential to reverse disengagement and improve economic outcomes.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This study suggests that trusted adults are particularly important for young people who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging from education and employment. Organizations working with marginalized youth should consider fostering community spaces where young people can meet and develop relationships with trusted adults. They can also support adults who are already present in young people’s lives in implementing a low-key, direct, and equitable communication style.

One of the study’s most important findings is that paid professionals, such as youth workers, can become trusted adults. Organizations should pay attention to the institutional context in which these relationships develop, and find ways to effectively manage these relationships (e.g. plan for staff turnover or young people aging out of institutions).



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