



TRANSFORMATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS FOR YOUTH SUCCESS

Center
for the
Study
of
Social
Policy

When youth who have faced serious adversity talk about what helped them change their lives for the better, a relationship with an individual worker often plays a prominent part in the story. We set out to learn about these “transformational relationships,” in which youth come to think, feel, and act differently, and to find greater success in challenging areas like school, work, and connections with family and peers. What do workers actually do as they try to forge these relationships, and what do organizations do to create a culture that helps workers succeed more often?

In studying transformational relationships (see sidebar for details), we hoped to generate knowledge that would be useful for all work with youth who face serious challenges. We had an opportunity to learn about practice, in many different types of organizations, which was remarkably successful in building strong relationships. And we got to hear from young people who said that these relationships were a primary influence, sometimes the primary influence, on their ability to improve their lives. Here’s what we learned.

What Happens in a Transformational Relationship, Part 1: Five Worker Behaviors

1. Listen. Transformational relationships start with *youth being heard*. “Listening” was mentioned over and over throughout our interviews, and listening more also meant that workers talked less.

We just talk. We just talk. We just talk, like me and you would talk, and more importantly we actually listen.

People will tell you anything when you first meet them...People want to be heard, and people want to be seen, and nobody does that for them. If you can make them feel special, they will tell you anything, and they are all special.

Workers spoke of how they tried to make sure that they formed their impressions of a young person based on first-hand experience, rather than by reading a case record. They talked about knowing youth in ways that go beyond their needs for services.

...my supervisor {said} “It sounds as if you know her, but you don’t really know her.” And I was like “okay...” And then she asks me, “What was her favorite TV show? What does she like to do on the weekends? What are her friendships like? Like does she have friends?” and I was like

This brief was written by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), based on more than 80 interviews conducted in the United States by CSSP and in the United Kingdom by the Dartington Social Research Unit. Interviewees included:

- youth, roughly 16-25 years old, who faced serious challenges (e.g. child welfare or juvenile justice system involvement, substance abuse or mental health issues, or homelessness) and who subsequently made major improvements in their lives;
- workers who have repeatedly formed important relationships with such youth; and
- leaders of organizations that do exemplary work with youth and that make relationship a focus of their work.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation supported the development of this brief with the aim that it would serve as a resource for partners working to create opportunity and help young people succeed in school and at work. We tested this through further interviews with six such organizations, conducted by John Padilla of New Paradigms Consulting. These interviews affirmed the relevance of the ideas and provided additional examples of what they look like in practice, some of which have been incorporated into the brief. We hope this material will be helpful to you, whether it offers new ideas to try out; provides a framework and language to supporting existing practices; or simply reaffirms concepts you have been working with for many years.

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“I don’t know, I didn’t ask those questions” ... we literally went to McDonalds on the block and we sat down and I was like “I want to get to know you, tell me a little bit about you.” She went on about school and employment, and I was like “No no no, what do you like to do, what do your friends do?” And she started opening up...

Listening also means listening without judging. When asked how the worker with whom they had a transformational relationship differed from other workers they had interacted with, numerous youth replied that this worker “didn’t judge me.”

I feel like I can be myself...because she knows me and she’s not judging me. And like, because she knows everything about me, do you know what I mean? Like...So yes, I feel like I can be myself around her.

He understood me. He understood I wasn’t just a monster, this animal. He knew I was a good person.

2. Take Time. Transformational relationships *take time*, in two ways. The first is the *intensive* time often needed at the beginning - the sheer persistence needed to reach someone who may not be eager to be reached. Workers spent many hours, sometimes over the course of weeks or even months, in order to make the initial connection. We heard many stories illustrating this commitment to be “relentless.”

For the past two months or however long it’s been, I’ve been the one who’s calling, calling, calling, going to his house, going to his house, going to his house, calling him, trying to help him figure out a way. Even though he’s – doesn’t buy it, doesn’t really want to work with me, doesn’t want to turn himself in, all that stuff, when he’s in trouble, who does he call? He gets probably one person to call, and he calls me. That’s really the beginning of the transformational relationship.

The second is the *extensive* time needed, sometimes lasting months, to develop trust. The course is rarely smooth. Young people may approach for a time, then move away, then approach again, slowly increasing their trust and openness to the worker.

... you’re in there for the long-haul, you know. They have so many people who just pop into life and disappear, and so just realizing that you are going to keep being there ... So just not giving up on somebody really, not running away because they’re not reacting right...

And it’s chipping away, chipping away, chipping away.

3. Be “real.” Many young people used this word when workers with whom they had formed a strong relationship. It most often meant that the worker had told the youth enough about himself or herself to be seen as a whole person, not just someone filling a job role. The worker was able to convey an understanding of the youth’s background, whether from having had similar experiences growing up or through relationships with other youth. That might also include finding other points of connection, as simple as a shared allegiance to a sports team or a favorite musician. So long as this kind of identification could be achieved, differences in age, gender, or race did not present substantial barriers to relationship.

It’s not just a one-sided thing. I think that’s where people tend to -- there’s a disconnect you think, “Okay I’m gonna get to know you and you’re going to know nothing about me.” That’s impossible, that’s not a real relationship.

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In reviewing these findings, readers should keep three points in mind:

- Each young person is different. In this brief, we are generalizing about experiences that were common, but not universal, among the people we met. The picture we’re painting is a composite that can’t describe any individual perfectly.
- Relationships are not a magic bullet. They can’t substitute for a safe place to live, a job, or treatment for a mental health problem.
- A relationship with a worker is a means, not an end. It is a bridge to a different life – to progress in school or at work, and to the capacity to build (or re-build) the healthy relationships, with family and friends and with supervisors and colleagues at work, that all of us depend upon.



4. Challenge the Youth. Young people told us that their worker “pushes me to do better” and “confronts me when necessary.” On the other hand, they almost never thought that the worker “feels sorry for me.”

... if he felt sorry for me, he would have never gave me criticism in order for me to better myself... He would just let me fail, I guess.

I said, “You will be pissed off at me,” and I said, “You’re going to be upset at me. You’re going to be pissed off at me because if I respect you enough and I want what’s best for you, I’m going to have to do the hard things and say the hard things to you.”

These challenges did not come at the very beginning of a relationship – not until it was clear that the worker cared about the youth and was not judgmental, and not until the worker thought that the youth would be able to recognize the difference between challenging an action and judging a person. But we were convinced that they are essential, not optional. The purpose of the relationship is, after all, to promote positive change in a young person’s life. Without challenges, the relationship could too easily drift, avoiding the hardest issues that stand in the way of growth. A relationship did not become *transformational* until it survived difficult feelings and complicated conversations in addition to times of connection.

You build trust because something’s gone wrong and then you realise that oh it’s okay...it takes a little argument or a little misunderstanding or something to realise oh they’re okay you know. You had an argument and you still survived, great. Whereas if everything’s just fine you never really know what’s (what), you know...

5. Show up in crises. Youth sometimes experience very difficult events, and too often they do not have a relative or friends whom they can count on to help with these crises. When this happened to youth we interviewed, workers who showed up, stayed with them, and helped them get through the problem built a great deal of trust.

Perhaps more remarkably, we saw the same dynamics in play when young people made mistakes, sometimes very serious ones. They did this even when their lives were getting better. Sometimes they felt a powerful sense of shame as a result, and this led them to back away from relationships that were helping them. We were impressed by how often the workers we met had been able to turn these moments into positive turning points that both supported the youth’s growth and ultimately strengthened the relationship.

Some of these young men have never had someone show up when they fail... they start to have this extreme thinking of, “I’m a failure. See? I told you I didn’t want to do that,” or “I ain’t trying that again,” or “It’s all right, man. Never mind.” If they’re not answering phone calls or whatever, we’re still knocking on doors and showing up, and we’re letting them know it’s okay. That’s a part of real life, failure. There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re not a failure. You’re not stupid. You just didn’t pass this time. You just failed this time, but you’re not a failure.

All of these behaviors – listening, taking time, being real, challenging, showing up in a crisis – could produce a very strong connection between workers and youth.”

I hadn't experienced love in like a really long time and that's what I got from her.

I think what always gets them back is that they know that they matter to you, that you love and care about them. Even when they're spitting in your face angry, it's the same as when you're spitting in your face angry at your parent. We're not parents, but it's the same type of feeling, like, "I know they're going to be there. I'm angry because what they're saying is right, and it hurts me..."

What Happens in a Transformational Relationship, Part 2: How Youth Change

We began to understand how these worker behaviors make a difference as we listened to the young people we interviewed talk about what their lives were like before things started to get better for them. Four themes stood out:

1. The **overwhelming amount of stress** they had to deal with, and the extent to which they had to focus on getting through each day with the least possible damage, physical or psychological.
2. The **difficulty of experiencing and recognizing emotions**. Even for youth who have not experienced significant adversity, adolescence is a time of conflicting and confusing emotions. This ordinary challenge was made extraordinary by the difficulties in the lives of the youth we met. Some were angry much of the time, and some withdrew or found ways to numb themselves.
3. **Negative self-perception and shame**. This was expressed frequently and powerfully. Some of the youth remembered feeling that they didn't matter to others, that they were all messed up, and even that they didn't matter to themselves.
4. **A lack of agency** – that is, many of these young people did not believe that they had meaningful choices to make or that they had much of a say in their own future.

These same youth were capable of making major improvements in their lives. When we interviewed them, they still faced significant stresses, and many still struggled with their feelings, but they were no longer overwhelmed. They all believed that they had important choices to make and that those choices would help to determine their future. And their self-perceptions had changed dramatically; while many had regrets over things they had done, they expressed pride in themselves and they were convinced that they had changed for the better. Many were back in school, others were working regularly, and they often reported that other important relationships in their lives were healthier. A transformational relationship with a worker had helped them in several ways.

1. It **helped youth see that they matter**. They were surprised when a worker showed up even when the youth did not want to see them; showed up again and again; kept showing up even after the young person had done something wrong; showed up when not expected (to help celebrate even a small accomplishment, or to help deal with a crisis in the evening or on a weekend); and challenged the youth about negative behaviors when it might be easier to say nothing. These experiences differed from what the youth had come to take for granted – that they didn't matter, and that anyone allowed to become important would soon leave. Eventually, the youth began to matter more to themselves.
2. As they mattered more to themselves, **youth saw that things could be different**. They began to reflect on their lives, in a way they had not been able to do earlier. At the same time, the worker encouraged the youth to think about what they wanted to become; challenged negative thinking and behavior; noticed and reinforced positive accomplishments; and helped the youth practice the skills needed to move ahead in the world.
3. As they began to see and act upon possibilities, **young people gained (or regained) agency and experienced pride**. Their choices made a difference, and when the difference was a positive one they deserved credit for it – and this reinforced the sense that they do indeed matter. Small changes led to bigger changes, and built confidence and self-esteem.
4. Through these changes, **youth began to slow down and became better able to regulate themselves**. They were more often able to respond to challenges in ways that, at least, didn't get them into trouble, and at best, became another source of pride.

How Organizations Support Transformational Relationships: Five Organizational Behaviors

Just as there are worker behaviors that support the development of strong relationships, there are organizational behaviors that promote those relationships.

1. Put relationships at the heart of practice. Leaders in the organizations we visited understand relationships to be essential to the work; they talk about relationships and build supports for relationships. Developing a relationship with each young person is an explicit goal, and is a focus of supervision, especially at the beginning of the work. In our prior experience, even with very strong service providers, this initial period is often seen as one in which the worker's key responsibility is to conduct an assessment, and/or to develop a service plan. Here we saw organizations where the first job is to build a relationship. Sometimes this also meant leaving even important issues unaddressed for a time, because they would be far easier to work on in the context of a strong relationship. Many organizations tried to help youth create strong relationships with more than one worker, both to create additional opportunities (for example, to learn how to relate to people with different styles) and as a hedge against the risk of worker turnover.

2. Hire workers with the capacity to excel at relating to youth, focusing first on personal qualities and only second, if at all, on past work experience and related qualifications. Among the workers we interviewed, qualities that seemed particularly important included:

- **Optimism**, in the sense of seeing the potential in each person, and viewing youth who have experienced adversity as “good people in bad situations”;
- **Emotional maturity**, often captured in our interviews with the phrase “it’s not about me” that is, viewing youth as having primary responsibility for changing their own lives, and being able to handle setbacks and even very challenging behavior directed at the worker without taking it personally; and
- **Flexibility**, the willingness to act differently with different people and to try something new when a strategy isn’t working.

One organization interviewed for this brief described some of the ways in which it has put relationships at the heart of practice – an “expectation” rather than a “best practice”:

- services have to be voluntary, with young people deciding “when, where and how they would like to interact with services and supports”;
- “young people set the goals”;
- staff are seen as coaches, rather than case managers – “coaches provide guidance, but the players play the game”; and
- youth have to be at the table to discuss what they need whenever policies are being re-examined, new funding is being announced, etc.

Many of those interviewed, both in the original CSSP study and among Casey Foundation partners, believed that critical worker attributes can’t be taught. They thought that workers who will go on to be successful in building transformational relationships can learn a lot on the job, but need to arrive liking youth; able to accept them regardless of how they look or what problems they’ve had in the past; not “trying to fix” youth; and able to reflect on their own behavior. An important implication of this belief was that organizations had to incorporate into their recruitment and selection procedures methods aimed at helping them identify staff with strong relational skills. These included:

- having candidates meet with several staff members, sometimes in informal settings;
- having candidates meet with several staff members, sometimes in informal settings;
- having youth (current or former program participants) be part of the panel of interviewers;
- getting feedback from everyone a candidate meets (including the receptionist);

- group interviews with multiple candidates, to see how they relate to one another;
- interviews that included role-playing and/or response to scenarios involving relationship-building; and
- developing internship programs with local colleges as a pipeline to employment, giving the agency and prospective worker a chance to try one another out over an extended period before making a long-term commitment.

We also wondered about the effects of a worker's age, gender, race, and ethnicity on transformative relationships. Does greater congruence in some of these attributes (the worker being of the same race or gender as an individual youth, or closer in age to the youth) make it easier or harder to form a transformational relationship? The only conclusion we can draw with certainty is that differences can be overcome, as we saw numerous examples of relationships succeeding across these boundaries. We have noted above the importance, in these situations, of workers establishing some common ground with the youth.

3. Relate to workers in ways that model how they want workers to relate to youth. The organizations we visited tried in many ways to create a supportive culture and to develop a spirit of camaraderie among workers. Examples included:

- “Spoken and unspoken rules” that include “speaking kindly and directly to one another”; ensuring that anyone who is being spoken about is in the room (or, when this is impossible, talking about them only as you would if they were present); and expecting everyone to hold each other accountable for these behaviors without regard to organizational hierarchy;
- Focusing pre-service orientation for cohorts of new workers on helping them connect with one another;
- Avoiding “shaming and blaming” when dealing with problems;
- Supervision that helped workers build relationships and deal with the complicated feelings those relationships involved;
- Efforts to help workers deal with the stress inherent in their jobs and attend to their own wellness; and
- Creating high-level mentoring positions for a few staff who were seen as extraordinary at relationships, so they can spend time helping others build the same skills.

4. Help workers plan for and respond to difficult periods in relationships. What might be labeled “resistance” elsewhere was instead understood as a combination of the youth not yet being ready and the organization not yet having found the right way to reach him or her – a spur to greater persistence and additional flexibility, rather than a reason to lose hope. When a youth pulls away from a close relationship with a worker, it's an unsurprising development and a chance to reconnect and push the relationship deeper.

5. Offer youth help in addition to the relationship. This should be a source of strength in opportunity-focused organizations, which can help youth make critical connections to school, jobs, and housing. These practical supports help to reduce the sometimes extraordinary stresses youth encounter every day, making room in their lives for change. The effect of a strong relationship is also enhanced when it is connected to a broader practice model, with other elements including (for example) helping youth understand the effects of trauma; identify their hopes and dreams; and build self-regulation skills.

