



Youth Thrive in Practice:

Social Connections Between Young People & Their Peers

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What is *Youth Thrive in Practice: Social Connections Between Youth and Peers*?

Considerations and questions for youth workers and system leadership to explore that focus on building and strengthening young people's relationship with their peers.

Why are Social Connections between young people and their peers important?

Research shows that the relationship between young people and their peers is fundamental for adolescent development. Through social connections with peers, young people are able to build and strengthen their Protective and Promotive Factors:

- [Youth Resilience](#)
- [Social Connections](#)
- [Knowledge of Adolescent Development](#)
- [Concrete Support in Times of Need](#)
- [Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence](#)

Additionally, peer relationships serve as a buffer against feelings of loneliness and depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

Considerations and questions for youth workers when collaborating with young people to strengthen their Social Connections with their peers:

- **Help young people to develop relationships with their peers.**
 - How are young people being helped to explore their interests and identify activities they would like to try to meet others with similar interests (e.g., participate in school band, community service, or cultural activities)?

Valuing Peer Relationships

Understanding the important role friends have in the lives of young people, social connections should be supported and not used as a means of punishment or to control behavior.

Visits with friends should not be “earned” for “good” behavior and not be unnecessarily or arbitrarily taken away when young people participate in negative, unhealthy, or risky activities or make decisions that adults do not agree with.

Instead, have conversations with young people about positive and negative risks and consequences and determine together appropriate actions to be taken in response to a young person's negative actions or behaviors.

- How are young people being supported to re-connect with friends from former schools, neighborhoods, or extracurricular activities?
- How is the young person safely using social media to connect with peers?
- What is the young person looking for in their peer relationships (e.g., similar interests, confidant, or someone to commiserate with)?
- How is a young person being helped to improve their skills in forming and keeping peer relationships? Does the young person need help understanding how to successfully make friends or be in a relationship with another young person (e.g., building trust, mutual respect, listening, and sharing)?
- How is a young person being helped to identify expectations and limits about a relationship or friendship?
- How is the young person being supported to maintain a sense of self and recognize when a relationship or friendship is safe, respectful and beneficial?
- **Talk to young people about what they need to build and maintain their relationships with peers.**
 - How do they communicate with their peers in order to stay connected (e.g., phone/text, social media, in-person and/or virtual activities)?
 - What helps or prevents the young person from participating in activities with their peers (e.g., shyness, lack of access to technology and/or transportation)?
 - Do they have a safe and consistent place to go to connect with friends and/or their significant other (e.g., community center, their or the friend's home)?
 - What does the young person like to do with their peers and how can they be helped to do these activities more often (e.g., need someone to walk them to their friend's house, set up a Netflix party account for watching movies together, create a Houseparty account to remotely play games with friends)?
 - What ideas for staying connected with peers are being shared with young people (e.g., create a WhatsApp group; suggest outside activities, such as throwing a football, yoga, walking around a track; plan and write on a calendar when the friends and young person will video-chat)?
- **Talk with the young person if a friendship turns negative.**
 - How is the young person being helped to understand and manage their feelings after the relationship or friendship turns negative (e.g., when the young person is ready to talk, ask what happened and listen without judgment or offering advice)?
 - When and how is learning from the friendship discussed (e.g., determine the best time to discuss this—it may be in that moment or a few days later—and let the young person lead the conversation)?
 - Is the young person willing to explore what they would do differently next time? If yes, start the conversation. This is not an “I told you so” moment. Refrain from using language that is judgmental or would prevent the young person from sharing.
 - What help does the young person need to manage or navigate this experience?

- **Help caregivers to support the relationship between young people and their peers.**
 - Is information on the importance of peers shared with caregivers, especially as it relates to building resiliency, supporting adolescent brain development, and concrete supports in times of need?
 - What ideas are being shared with caregivers for how they can help young people to develop and maintain relationships with their peers (e.g., helping the young person get to extracurricular activities or connecting them with activities and events in the community)?
 - How are caregivers creating a supportive environment that is welcoming of the young person's friends or significant others (e.g., encourage young people to invite their friends or partner over)? If the caregiver is hesitant about doing this, what are their concerns and how can they be helped to address them?
 - What are the caregivers concerns about the young person developing and maintaining friendships? If the caregiver shares that the friendship is negative, are they able to share examples of how the friendship is negatively impacting the young person?
 - If there are concrete concerns, how can these be discussed with the young person and is there an opportunity to explore how their relationship with their peer can be safely maintained? If the concerns are related to bias due to race, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE), class, immigration status, or disability, take the opportunity to hold conversations with the caregiver about implicit bias, its impact on young people, and provide occasions to learn more about diversity and equity.

Considerations and questions for systems to strengthen the relationship between young people and their peers:

- **A culture of trust between adults and young people is critical for a young person's development and well-being. This includes trust between young people and their youth worker, caregivers, family members, and other caring adults who are important to the young person.**
 - How are youth workers being encouraged and helped to build trust with young people (e.g., trained in trust-building exercises, urged to be transparent and honest with young people, provided with the space and time to authentically partner with young people)?
 - How is trust being discussed with the young person (e.g., tell them they are trusted, responsibilities and expectations that come with trust, ask the young person what they need from adults to feel and uphold trust)?
 - What actions are being taken to show the young person they are trusted (e.g., seeking their input for important decisions, brainstorming with the young person on how to safely get home after an activity; allowing them to walk to/from school with friends)?
 - What resources are available to help young people explore trust, how it is critical for their relationships, and what are some opportunities for building it?
- **Reinforce a commitment to young people building and sustaining peer relationships.**
 - Which policies need to be updated to reflect a commitment to building and sustaining young people's social connections with their peers (e.g., instead of a "do not call list," has there been conversation with the young person about peers they may want to include on their contact list)?
 - How are youth workers coached to have conversations with the young person and their caregiver about the importance of peer relationships?

- When and how often are youth workers having conversations with caregivers about helping a young person to build and sustain peer relationships (e.g., during monthly visits, caregiver events)?
- Are sufficient funds available to help pay for the costs of any extracurricular activities that the young person may be interested in that connect them with other young people (e.g., travel sports team, dance group, art supplies)? How is this information communicated to caregivers and young people?
- How are agency staff and caregivers trained to apply the reasonable and prudent parent standard in support of “normalcy” for all young people in foster care? (For more information on normalcy, please visit: <https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/capacity/Blob/106086.pdf?r=1&rpp=10&upp=0&w=+NATIVE>) Are examples of the types of activities young people should have access to included in the training? Is information about the important role of friends in a young person’s life included in the training?
- If the young person is in a congregate care setting, how are the young person’s interests and participation in extracurricular curricular activities (at school, on campus, or in the community) being encouraged? Does the young person have access to food at appropriate times (e.g., if they return back from their activity or job after dinner time, is food set aside)?

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