

## Relationships

*This brief is the second in a four part series, [Relationships, Routines, Resilience: Reopening with the Three Rs](#), designed to share some of the key practices, strategies and structures to support students' return to in-person school. Each brief includes the science grounding, implications for practice, and resources.*

### THE SCIENCE

Human beings are relational, and from this recognition emerges two essential developmental understandings. The first is that strong relationships build strong brain architecture, providing critical avenues to learning and growth. Relationships are our strongest example of a positive [context](#) and are central to how children learn new skills, develop identities and seek out pursuits, activities and vocations. The second is that relationships provide a protective buffer to the negative impact of chronic stress. The hormone oxytocin is released through trusting relationships, and it protects children, at the cellular level, from the damaging effects of cortisol.



When we talk about relationships with children, it is about more than just being “nice”; it is about creating the type of support that can fundamentally change the way a child develops. Positive developmental relationships are the “active ingredient” in any effective child-serving system or intervention (Li & Julian, 2012). Characterized by emotional attachment, joint reciprocal interactions, progressive complexity and balance of power, these relationships directly facilitate social, emotional and cognitive growth and empower students as [active agents](#), rather than passive recipients.

### THE PRACTICE

In classrooms that exemplify these characteristics, teachers and support staff honor the [integrated](#) nature of learning through careful attention to the relational aspects of experiences and attunement to the [unique developmental pathway](#) of each child. This means that teachers and other adults in the school community know students well and strive to meet their individual needs. Learning experiences are designed to recognize student competence and agency, providing ample opportunities for choice, voice, collaboration, appropriately scaffolded support and increasing autonomy. In these classrooms, adults intentionally work to nurture personalized understandings of individuals, rather than relying on assumptions or stereotypes, and plan for both shared and individualized learning experiences (*e.g., class meeting/advisory, student conferencing, restorative conversations, goal-setting*).

School and district leaders create the conditions that encourage relationships to flourish. They do this at the school level by setting up and sustaining structures that provide ample time and space for on-going connections and individualized or small group interactions between adults and students (*e.g., afterschool and summer programs, looping, block schedules, cross-grade buddies, peer mentors*). At the district level, leaders allocate resources, set policies and develop partnerships that maximize relationship-building opportunities (*e.g., smaller class sizes and schools, longer grade spans k-8, 6-12, partnerships with community organizations*). In all their

actions, leaders demonstrate the importance of relationships by being inclusive leaders, intentionally supporting staff capacity and skills, and honoring opportunities for staff relationships and collaboration.

Given the understanding that all children develop [in context](#), a school setting that centers relationships intentionally prioritizes and integrates not only relationships between educators and students, but also with families/caregivers, community organizations and members, and among students as an integral part of its culture. Historically, the design of school systems has perpetuated deep structural racism, continued depersonalized settings where implicit bias goes unchecked and preserved uneven power dynamics, which continue to marginalize systematically oppressed groups (*e.g., Black, Indigenous and students of Color, students with learning differences, English learners and other groups*). Meaningfully engaging all stakeholders in the school community, valuing their assets and expertise and seeking understanding across lines of difference can support schools in redesigning for equity.

In summary:

<p><b>Developmental relationships are NOT:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Just being friendly to children and families</li> <li>• Successful simply because we have good intentions</li> <li>• Built on assumptions about groups and defined by those historically in positions of power</li> <li>• Transactional and directive</li> </ul>	<p><b>Developmental Relationships ARE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The responsibility of all educators and worthy of time and space within the school day</li> <li>• Created on a foundation of trust</li> <li>• Built through repeated, reciprocal interactions</li> <li>• Bi-directional and ever-changing based on needs and growth</li> <li>• A way to center traditionally marginalized groups in decision-making, culture building, and creation of an identity-affirming environment</li> <li>• A priority for all students, especially those who have experienced chronic stress/trauma</li> </ul>
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## RESOURCES

- ❑ Turnaround’s Toolbox for Whole Child Design – [Developmental Relationships](#)  
Specific tools include:
  - Relationships Inventory – An educator inventory and student surveys to reflect on relational aspects of the classroom.
  - Individualized Relationship Strategies – Eight tools to strengthen relationships with individual students.
  - Empathetic Listening Strategies – Five ways to actively listen to build trusting relationships.
  - More to come in June
- ❑ Turnaround’s [Well-Being Index](#) – A tool to collect holistic data – physical, social, psychological, emotional well-being – systematically, directly, quickly, and in real time.
- ❑ Greater Good Science Center’s [California SEL Modules](#)