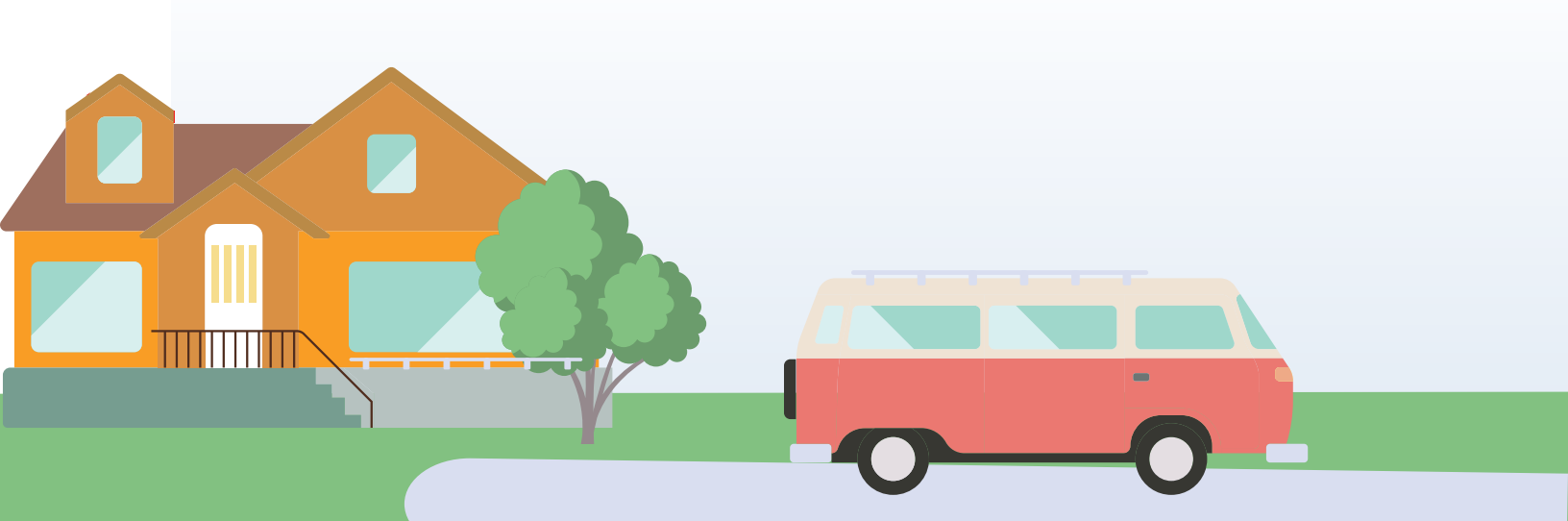


NAVIGATING YOUR NATURAL SUPPORTS JOURNEY



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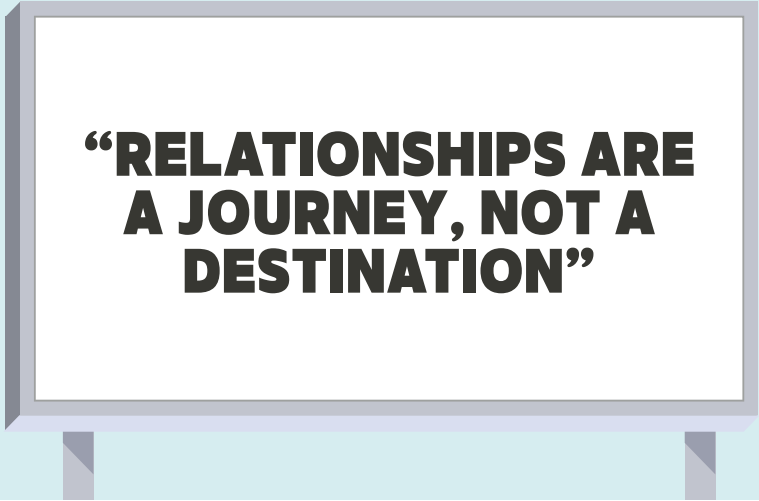
Acknowledgement

The **Natural Supports Leadership Table (NSLT)** is a group of stakeholders with the shared objective of uplifting and supporting natural supports work happening in Alberta through enhanced communication, coordination, and alignment. The goal of this work is to increase belonging and social connection in Alberta, as we know there are many people who do not have these supports in their lives. It requires individuals and communities to step up and step in.

Natural Supports “are mutually beneficial relationships that include close connections, such as family and friends, and broader connections such as neighbours, coaches, community organizations and local businesses.”

Our natural supports:

- contribute to our feelings of belonging within a community
- function as safety nets when life does not go as planned
- provide valuable learnings we rely on to support our development across the lifespan.

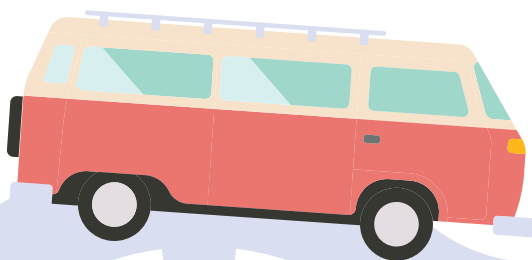


**“RELATIONSHIPS ARE
A JOURNEY, NOT A
DESTINATION”**

Section 1: Starting with WHY

At 17, Marcus was struggling to find direction. He bounced between temporary housing situations after his family life became too unstable to stay at home. With no clear guidance and few role models, he felt lost and unsure of what his future could hold.

It was during this challenging time that Marcus met Coach Ryan at a community youth program. Coach Ryan was different from anyone Marcus had encountered before. He wasn’t just there to enforce rules or give advice; he genuinely listened and showed up consistently. For Marcus, that meant everything.



From their first meeting, Coach Ryan made an effort to connect with Marcus on a personal level. He asked about his interests, his goals, and even the things that worried him. Marcus had always been passionate about basketball, so Coach Ryan used that shared interest to build rapport. But their conversations quickly went beyond sports.

“He wasn’t just my coach on the court,” Marcus recalls. “He became someone I could talk to about anything—school, life, my dreams, even my fears.”

Coach Ryan encouraged Marcus to stay focused on his education and to think about his future in a broader sense. He helped him see the potential he had, both on and off the court. With Coach Ryan’s support, Marcus began to believe in himself. He started setting goals, both academically and personally, and Coach Ryan was there every step of the way, offering guidance and encouragement.

As Marcus approached graduation, Coach Ryan helped him explore different career paths and even took him on visits to local colleges. For the first time, Marcus felt like he had options and a future to look forward to.

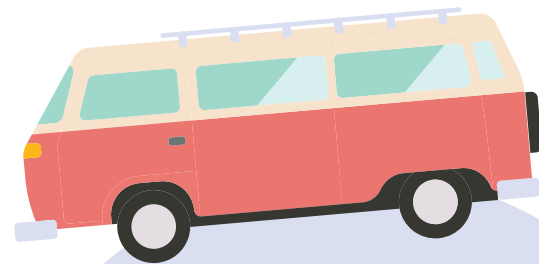
Today, Marcus is thriving in college, balancing his studies with a part-time job at a local gym where he mentors younger kids. He’s determined to become a coach himself one day, inspired by the difference Coach Ryan made in his life.

“Coach Ryan wasn’t just someone who helped me with my jump shot,” Marcus says with a smile. “He’s the reason I found my path. He believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself, and that changed everything.”

Be a Mr.Jensen Video



Watch



- Think about a ‘Marcus’ that you know. What could be a first step in creating or strengthening a relationship with them?
- How do you think watching Marcus grow and succeed, influenced Coach Ryan’s sense of purpose and fulfillment as a coach?
- How can you encourage others to think about a young person they know who could use a supportive adult in their life?

Section 2: Getting Ready – Planning and Packing

This resource is created for adults who have contact with youth in some aspect of their life. Examples include teachers, coaches, friends, neighbours, families (biological or chosen) and others who could make up part of a support network.

A road trip is defined as “a long journey, especially one that is recreational or spontaneous taken in an automobile.” The analogy between a road trip and the natural supports approach highlights the flexible and informal nature of both. Just as a road trip can be spontaneous, unstructured, and adaptable, natural supports are often informal, evolving as needed rather than following a rigid structure. This analogy captures the essence of how natural supports function, emphasizing their flexibility, responsiveness, non-judgemental and person-centered nature. Please note that this resource is a guide rather than a comprehensive “how-to-manual”, and there is much more to explore beyond what is covered here. To help take Natural Supports beyond what you learn here, the following have been included:



A growing body of research highlights the significant impact of Natural Supports on healthy youth development. These supports are crucial for fostering youth resilience, social integration, mental health and overall positive growth. They also play a key role in aiding recovery, reducing psychological distress, and helping vulnerable youth transition successfully into adulthood. There is also extensive research on youth social networks and social capital, focusing on the structure of relationships in young people's lives.

A recent report (2023) from the U.S Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, states “Social connection—the structure, function, and quality of our relationships with others—is a critical and underappreciated contributor to individual and population health, community safety, resilience, and prosperity.”

While professional supports are valuable, they're not always sustainable. Programs end, professionals move on, and some youth eventually age out of services. By applying a Natural Supports approach with youth in our lives, we aim to empower them to build and maintain a lifelong network of supportive relationships with family, community, and peers.

Section 3: The Road Trip – Approach & Principles

a. Connections First

Humans are innately driven to connect with others, making connection a foundational aspect of well-being. In the Connection First approach, we prioritize the role of Natural Supports, recognizing that these connections are crucial for the emotional and psychological health of youth.

Unlike basic physical needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, which often take precedence, the need for identity, belonging, affection, and connection is equally vital. A Natural Supports approach is highly individualized and context-specific, without a one-size-fits-all guide. Research indicates that youth often seek connection with their natural supports even during crises, before their basic needs are fully met. A healthy sense of identity and belonging is critical to youth development, so we make these explicit goals of our work, actively seeking to strengthen both.

A single connection to a positive natural support can be a powerful starting point, but it's essential to continue fostering and expanding these relationships. The goal is to help youth build a lifetime network of support, ensuring a deep sense of belonging and security.

Connection with natural supports is treated as a priority, akin to basic needs like shelter. This means that efforts to identify and strengthen real-world connections can begin immediately. By doing so, we help create a strong, enduring support system that addresses both the immediate and long-term needs of youth.

Be A Social Snacker

Social snacking describes brief and informal positive interactions in daily events, which contribute to happiness, sense of belonging and identity, and help to build naturally supportive communities.

To learn more about the Social Snacking Toolkit from Connections First, go to:

connectionsfirst.ca/social-snacking

Challenge yourself to three social snacks a day!



“Before you can ever inspire, motivate, or influence, you must connect first.”

Greg Smith

- In the past, what has made me feel safe and welcome?
 - How am I creating a safe and welcoming environment?
- 

b. Youth and Family at the Center

Family members are often the first people we think of when considering supportive relationships. A Natural Supports approach allows youth to decide who is family to them. The involvement of family members, whether biological or chosen, ought to be decided by the youth, encouraging them to make their own decisions, identify goals, and what that person can contribute to their life at this time.

To be effective, engagement with families needs to take a strengths-based approach, recognizing and supporting their existing strengths and resources. Family and other natural supports are viewed as assets, not as ‘the problem,’ and an appreciative approach is taken seeing young people and their families as navigating stressful circumstances rather than being ‘dysfunctional.’ This perspective allows us to contextualize the challenges families face by identifying individual, institutional, and structural barriers that need to be addressed to better support the young person.

- How can we move from focusing on the family’s challenges as problems to recognizing their strengths and the positive role they can play in the youth’s life?
- How can you foster open communication with the youth, while respecting their independence and decisions?

“Ohana means family. Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.”

Lilo and Stitch

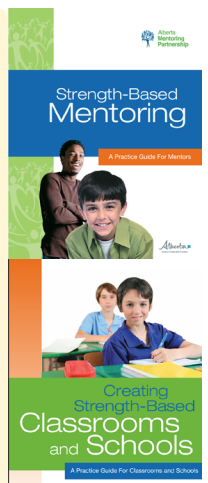
Alberta Family Wellness Videos



Watch

Alberta Mentoring Partnership's Strength-based Resources

- [Strength-Based Mentoring: A Practice Guide for Mentors](#)
- [Creating Strength-Based Classrooms and Schools: A Practice Guide for Classrooms and Schools](#)



c. Autonomy & Accountability

Naturally supportive relationships are more likely to be successful when autonomy and accountability are built in. Autonomy is defined as “the ability to make your own decisions about what to do rather than being influenced by someone else or told what to do”.

Youth voice, including ‘doing with, not for’, ‘nothing about us without us’ contribute to a sense of autonomy.

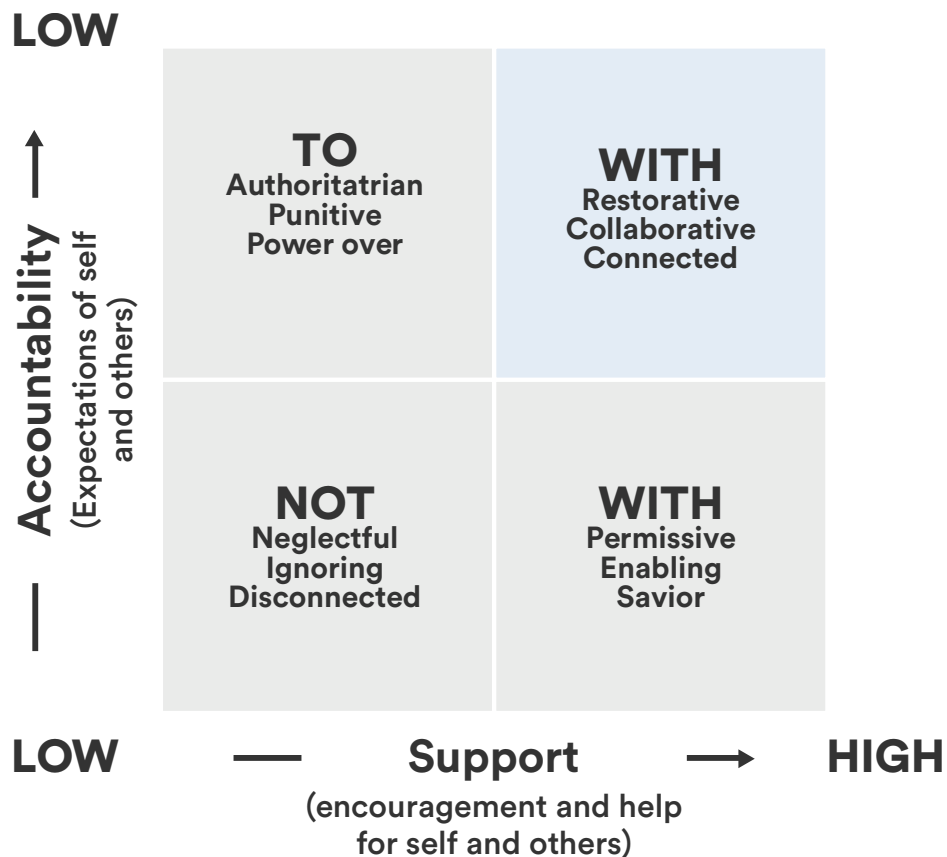
There is alignment between a natural supports approach and a restorative approach. The fundamental hypothesis of restorative practice states:

Human beings are happier, healthier, more productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior and their communities when we do things with them, rather than to them, for them, or not at all. (Ted Wachtel)

A Natural Supports approach involves working in partnership with youth, ensuring that their perspectives and priorities drive the relationship. Youth lead this journey and decide who they want in their web of support. Instead of discouraging contact with people not approved of, work with the youth to develop strategies to help them to navigate those relationships safely and support them to find meaning in the relationships they have lost.

Sometimes an adult may think they are a natural support in a youth’s life but the youth may not feel the same way. In order for the relationship to have an impact, youth voice must be honoured.

The visual below provides examples of how all relationships are influenced by both accountability and support. Relationships with high accountability combined with high support will result in strong connections and personal growth, while others will not create the trusting, supportive and empowering relationships youth need to thrive.



This visual can be used as a reflection tool to help be more purposeful in our words and actions. This is not a new idea. Think back to when you were a youth, perhaps in high school. Who were the people you respected, looked up to? How did they treat and interact with you? They most likely created relationships and environments reflected in the ‘with’ quadrant.



“Give young people a greater voice. They are the future and they are much wiser than we give them credit for.”

Desmond Tutu

Young people need to be supported to make choices and learn from their mistakes. This requires enough information to make informed decisions and allows youth the freedom to make those decisions, which also comes with responsibilities.

For youth to grow, adults need to resist the urge to problem solve or ‘fix’ for them. Allowing youth to make mistakes and solve their problems is part of the learning process and teaches responsibility and accountability for their decisions.



- Take a look at the words in the To, Not and For quadrants. Can you think of situations or relationships you’ve been in where someone exhibited those traits toward you. How did that make you feel?
- Think back to the person you identified above. How did they make you feel? How can your interactions make a youth feel the same way?
- How do you feel about stepping back and letting youth make a mistake? Is your instinct to intervene? What strategies do you use not to?

d. Skill building that leads to growth

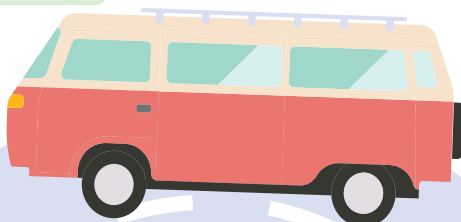
Skills development can be supported through various methods, including:

- Supportive Relationships: Building strong, trusting connections that facilitate learning and growth.
- Experiential Learning and Modeling: Providing hands-on experiences and demonstrating desired behaviors.
- Structured or Formal Programs: Accessing specific programs designed to enhance social-emotional learning.

The approach chosen depends on the individual needs and preferences of the youth, ensuring that the method resonates with them effectively.

“If they can see it, they can be it.”

Geena Davis Institute



Search Institute Developmental Relationships Framework

- [Search Institute Developmental Relationships Framework](#)
- [Developmental Relationships Framework](#)

- After reading appendix 6.4, which of the tips for building positive relationships with youth stand out for you in each of the five components?



e. Creating a Community of Caring

Working alongside youth to build and strengthen their web of support is creating a community of caring around them. What natural supports already exist? Who is in their web? Who else could be added to meet the needs they've identified? What is your role in this work?

It starts with one person taking an interest in a youth and builds from there.

In studies of youth development, social network and social capital theories are often linked because social capital is both a resource that emerges from social networks (known as bonding social capital) and a tool for expanding those networks (known as bridging social capital). Social capital refers to the social resources that people access and exchange in their relationships with others.

- Bonding (or exclusive) social capital refers to the value that comes from connections between people who already know each other or share a common identity, like family or cultural ties.
- Bridging (or inclusive) social capital extends beyond these shared identities to include connections with people from different groups. Bridging social capital provides access to people and resources that can expand a young person's web of support, adding to their community.

A Natural Supports approach includes both; building relationships and then connecting the youth to others. Helping youth create and strengthen their web of support means that all the pressure does not fall on one person alone. One person can be a natural support but youth need many.

Road trips are not always smooth. The same goes for relationships. Sometimes we encounter potholes. Bonding can be disrupted when a youth's behaviour does not seem in keeping with the situation, straining the relationship and connections to those around them. We don't always know what has happened in their past. Youth who have experienced traumatic or unpredictable relationships often feel overwhelmed by situations and develop protective mechanisms (e.g., suspicion, distrust) that can serve as a barrier to forming and maintaining close personal relationships.

The advances in brain science around trauma provide more information about its impact on the brain and how that is expressed in the behaviours we see. Being flexible and non-judgemental includes viewing behaviour through a trauma informed lens. Considerations include:

- Recognize that a youths' response may be the result of an overwhelmed nervous system. Don't take their behaviour personally.
- Learn some co-regulation strategies to help calm both you and the young person
- Help young people develop the ability to evaluate relationships wisely and support them in processing the loss of relationships.

If a trauma informed approach is not taken, a youth may lose their supports. Adults need to be persistent, dependable to show that youth that they are still there for them.

"Travel isn't always pretty. It isn't always comfortable. Sometimes it hurts, it even breaks your heart. But that's okay. The journey changes you; it should change you."

Anthony Bourdain

- What do you already know about brain science, impact of trauma, root causes of behaviour?
- How does this information change the way you think about and how you might respond to behaviours you see exhibited by youth?

Webs of Support

- [Webs of Support - Napkin Talk](#)
- [AMP Summit Webinar: Webs of Support \(October 2021\)](#)

Section 4: Thinking Back, Looking Forward

Just as at the end of a road trip you unpack your vehicle, it is important to recognize that some supportive relationships may pause or come to an end. This can happen for a variety of reasons; a move, a death, other change of circumstance or, in some cases, the young person may come to need different supports in their lives. In this situation, your role may be to help them identify who can fill that role.

Remember, this isn't personal or a failure but a sign of growth and moving forward!

This can also be a time to reflect on the trip, look back at photos, memories and remember the good times and the learnings. These may strengthen another current relationship and also inform future supportive relationships.

For decades research has shown the importance and impact of caring adults in a young person's life. These are people who have chosen to be in that person's life, a natural support. One adult cannot provide all the support that a youth needs.

This research emphasizes the vital role of natural supports—family, friends, mentors, and community members—in fostering resilience and positive youth development. These informal networks offer essential emotional, social, and practical assistance, especially during times of transition or challenge.

Much like a road trip, where a reliable map and trusted companions make the journey smoother, natural supports help guide youth through life's detours and obstacles. Investing in these supports benefits both individuals and the broader community, ensuring young people can confidently navigate challenges and reach their long-term destination of success.

**“TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN
SOMEONE’S LIFE, YOU DO NOT
HAVE TO BE BRILLIANT, RICH,
BEAUTIFUL OR PERFECT. YOU
JUST HAVE TO CARE.”**

MANDY HALE



Section 5: Planning your next Road Trip Adventure (A Bibliography of Contributors and Further Reading)

1. Alberta Mentoring Partnership:

A partnership of government ministries, government-funded organizations, schools, community agencies and youth working together to provide more mentoring opportunities for Alberta's children and youth.

Vision: Young people thrive through mentoring relationships.

Mission: Working together to strengthen Alberta's capacity to support and enhance mentoring.

- albertamentors.ca
- [Webinar: Natural Supports with Nancy Reynolds and Dr. Suzanne Tough | Alberta Mentoring Partnership](#)
- [Webinar: Social Snacking - Natural Supports & Social Snacking Webinar](#)

2. Connections First

Connections First is your hub for Natural Supports work in Alberta. This collaborative space is focused on understanding how natural supports can influence the well-being of people and the communities in which they live, and sharing learning and resources about the importance of natural supports.

- [Connections First](#)
- [Toolkit: Social Snacking](#)
- [A Guide to Building Naturally Supportive Communities](#)

3. The Mental Health Natural Supports Simulation

A 20 minute online interactive experience that raises awareness for the Natural Support role by building skills and confidence. By informing Natural Supports in our community about 8 supportive skills, we can help children and youth access supports, increase overall community well-being, and create a network of caring citizens who have the supportive skills to help.

- [Natural Supports Training](#)

4. Natural Supports Community of Practice (YYC)

The Natural Supports Community of Practice is a group of social service agencies in Calgary who are all actively implementing and learning about the Natural Supports Practice Framework.

- [Working with Youth to Enhance their Natural Supports](#)
- [Document: Working with Youth to Enhance their Natural Supports: Practice Framework](#)
- [Centre for Sexuality](#)

5. Search Institute - Developmental Relationships

For decades, Search Institute research has shown that young people's development is rooted in their community and in their relationships. The developmental relationships framework identifies five strategies to strengthen and deepen the relationships that help young people grow and thrive.

- [Developmental Relationships Framework](#)

6. Canadian Alliance on Social Connection and Health as a resource for their guidelines on social connection <https://casch.org/guidelines>

7. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, 2023

- [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation \(hhs.gov\)](#)

Section 6: Appendices

Section 6.1 - Rest Stop Reflections

1. Section 1: Starting with WHY

- Think about a 'Marcus' that you know. What could be a first step in creating or strengthening a relationship with them?

- How do you think watching Marcus grow and succeed, influenced Coach Ryan's sense of purpose and fulfillment as a coach?

- How can you encourage others to think about a young person they know who could use a supportive adult in their life?

2. Section 3: The Road Trip

a. Connections First

- In the past, what has made me feel safe and welcome?

- How am I creating a safe and welcoming environment?

b. Youth and Family at the Center

- How can we move from focusing on the family's challenges as problems to recognizing their strengths and the positive role they can play in the youth's life?

- How can you foster open communication with the youth, while respecting their independence and decisions?

c. Autonomy & Accountability

- Take a look at the words in the To, Not and For quadrants. Can you think of situations or relationships you've been in where someone exhibited those traits toward you. How did that make you feel?

- Think back to the person you identified above. How did they make you feel? How can your interactions make a youth feel the same way?

- How do you feel about stepping back and letting youth make a mistake? Is your instinct to intervene? What strategies do you use not to?

d. Skill Building that Leads to Growth

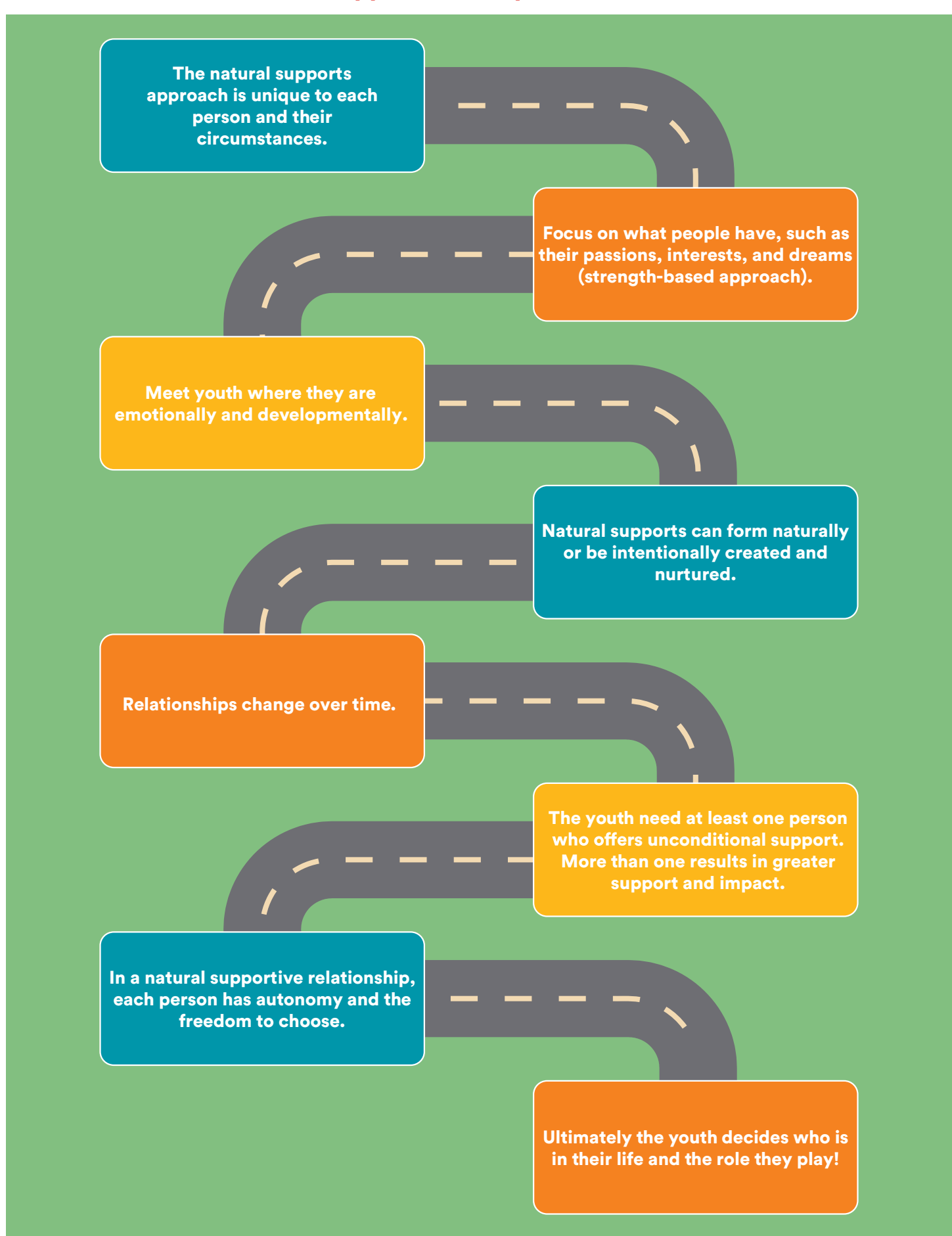
- After reading appendix 6.4, which of the tips for building positive relationships with youth stand out for you in each of the five components?

e. Creating a Community of Caring

- What do you already know about brain science, impact of trauma, root causes of behaviour?

- How does this information change the way you think about and how you might respond to behaviours you see exhibited by youth?

Section 6.2 - List of Natural Supports Assumptions



The natural supports approach is unique to each person and their circumstances.

Focus on what people have, such as their passions, interests, and dreams (strength-based approach).

Meet youth where they are emotionally and developmentally.

Natural supports can form naturally or be intentionally created and nurtured.

Relationships change over time.

The youth need at least one person who offers unconditional support. More than one results in greater support and impact.

In a natural supportive relationship, each person has autonomy and the freedom to choose.

Ultimately the youth decides who is in their life and the role they play!

Section 6.3 - Developmental Relationships Framework



DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Framework

Developmental relationships are the roots of thriving and resilience for young people, regardless of their background or circumstances. Through these relationships, young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. Just as trees rely on a system of roots to support and nourish them, young people need to experience developmental relationships in their families, schools, programs, and communities. However, too many young people miss these opportunities due to bias, prejudice, and systemic exclusion based on their race, ethnicity, income, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, or other differences. Ensuring that every young person experiences the developmental relationships they need is a vital challenge for the 21st century.

The Developmental Relationships Framework was developed by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN; 800-888-7828; www.searchinstitute.org.

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EXPRESS CARE

Show me that I matter to you.

Be dependable
Be someone I can trust

Be warm
Show me you enjoy being with me

Listen
Really pay attention when we are together

Encourage
Praise me for my efforts and achievements

Believe in me
Make me feel known and valued



CHALLENGE GROWTH

Push me to keep getting better.

Expect my best
Expect me to live up to my potential

Hold me accountable
Insist I take responsibility for my actions

Stretch
Push me to go further

Reflect on failures
Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks



PROVIDE SUPPORT

Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.

Navigate
Guide me through hard situations and systems

Advocate
Stand up for me when I need it

Empower
Build my confidence to take charge of my life

Set boundaries
Put limits in place that keep me on track



SHARE POWER

Treat me with respect and give me a say.

Respect me
Take me seriously and treat me fairly

Collaborate
Work with me to solve problems and reach goals

Include me
Involve me in decisions that affect me

Let me lead
Create opportunities for me to take action and lead



EXPAND POSSIBILITIES

Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.

Inspire
Inspire me to see possibilities for my future

Connect
Introduce me to people who can help me grow

Broaden horizons
Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places

Section 6.4 - Tips for Building Positive Relationships with Youth

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INSIGHTS



Ideas, strategies, and research from the field.

Tips for Building Positive Relationships with Youth Using the Developmental Relationship Framework

Author: Liliana Vega

Published on: April 13, 2023

Did you know having a caring adult is a common theme across multiple youth development frameworks? In addition, positive youth development research often cites the importance of having a positive and caring adult in a young person's life.

So, it is no wonder programs such as 4-H highlight and reinforces the importance of adults creating positive relationships with young people in our communities. We recognize youth-adult partnerships and relationships as core elements of positive youth development. We strive to build opportunities for young people to have caring adults who show youth they are cared for, appreciated, supported, and believe in them.

But just what does this look like? What should you do to ensure you are a fully supportive, caring adult in a young person's life?

One of the leading youth development research organizations, The Search Institute, conducted more extensive research and developed the Developmental Relationships Framework to illustrate how adults can build and foster positive relationships with young people in our communities.

The Developmental Relationships Framework highlights five key components. The five key components are:



Below are some examples of just how one can practice each of the key components and ensure one is intentionally building positive relationships with young people.

Express Care: Demonstrate you care for young people by

- Show young people they can depend on you. Following through and do what you say you will do. If you can not follow through on a promise made, then take the time to explain and apologize. If you have to tell a young person no, then explain the reason behind the no, do not just say no or because I said so. Help them learn to think critically about situations by taking time to explain it.
- Building trust. Talk positively about young people, do not talk negatively about them or share negative remarks about others. Build trust by not sharing information that is told in confidence unless it is information others need to know. If you are legally obligated to disclose information letting young people know can help them understand you are obligated and disclosing the information because you care about them and their safety.
- Making them feel valued, heard, and appreciated for who they are.
- Listen and seek to understand young people and their experiences. Check in with them to see how they are doing and demonstrate you care by listening and connecting them to resources when needed.
- Learn their name & pronouns: Take the time to greet them by name. Use the correct pronouns and their preferred names. Take time to demonstrate that you value their identity and respect who they are by greeting them by their name (using correct pronunciation) and preferred pronouns.
- Share stories and experiences that help you connect with young people (but make sure stories are appropriate and still maintain boundaries, be careful not to overshare).
- Be intentional about building relationships by doing team-building activities, incorporating social-emotional learning, taking time to socialize, and engaging in fun activities that are less serious and bring laughter, humor, and smiles.
- Have a positive attitude and avoid being negative and discouraging.
- Celebrate and encourage young people. Be their cheerleader and biggest advocate. Show them you appreciate them and value them. Let them know you believe in them and are there to help support them.
- Show up. Be there if you say you are going to be there. Be consistent.

Challenge Growth: Help them learn, grow, and become independent by

- Encouraging independence and autonomy. After all, 4-H is all about learning by doing! Help youth learn through experiential learning. Do not just provide them with answers. Help them learn to be critical thinkers and problem solvers.
- Teach them to have a growth mindset by teaching them they are capable of learning. Teach them to challenge themselves and remind them we are always learning, even us adults. Remember, it is okay to model to young people we, as adults, don't have all the answers and are also constantly learning.
- Be willing to learn alongside them. It is okay to pick up a new project you know nothing about and learn alongside the youth. For example, youth want to learn robotics, but you don't know anything about robotics, so what? Demonstrate and model your willingness to learn something new and that they should too! Besides, not being an expert in something forces you to depend on young people to help teach you and others. Model being resourceful and asking for help.
- Go outside your comfort zone and encourage them to do so as well. Show them that it is okay to be uncomfortable as we learn new things. Help them try new things and go to unfamiliar places. Mentor and support them as they do so but also make sure not to push them beyond where they feel unsafe and unsupported.
- Provide support and guidance – remember, young people are still learning. They need mentorship, role modeling, support, and guidance as they learn and develop new skills, learn new content, and try new things. Make sure to facilitate, guide and support them along the way. Help set them up for success. If they fail, be there to provide feedback, help them reflect and learn from the failure. Teach them failure is okay as long as we learn from it. After all, inventions are not developed on the first try, they are tested, adjusted, fixed, and retested continuously till there is a finished product. Learning is no different it is a continuous process. Encourage them to continue to learn and improve.
- Set high and realistic expectations. Let them know you believe in them, but also ensure youth have the resources to accomplish their goals, help them network, provide support and be their cheerleader. Have conversations with them about their goals, help them learn about SMART goals, and how to check their progress and adjust.
- Use an equity lens and support youth in culturally relevant ways. Biases can affect our ability to create safe environments where people gain a sense of belonging. Be willing to learn about bias and teach young people how to recognize their own biases and how they can harm how we interact with others. Make sure your bias are not leading to you interacting with young people in negative ways. When this happens, it can create negative outcomes for young people. Be willing to challenge negative and discriminatory comments, ask them to tell you more, and help them understand why specific remarks or statements are discriminatory and harmful.
- Help them develop critical thinking skills. Teach young people to expand their thinking, think about where they are getting their information, assess if it's factual or an opinion, and how to encourage discussions and be open to learning different perspectives. Help them learn to develop the skills to find credible sources and learn to educate themselves on issues.
- Help them have a hopeful purpose and think about their future. Ask them to think and imagine what they want in their lives and what it will take to get there. Ask youth: What do they care about? What issues are important to them? What do they enjoy doing? What is their spark? What interest them? What do they dislike? Help them explore things they care about and enjoy doing and expose them to the possibilities so they can find their passion.

Provide Support: Helping youth learn through mentorship, guidance, and support by

- Remembering youth are learning. Help provide guidance and support. Be careful not just to give the answers or do it for them. Instead, assess the support they need and provide them with just enough to help them learn and do it independently. You can always use the "I do, we do, you do" model. Show them how to do something, do it with them, then allow them to do it independently. Utilizing teens as teachers or peer-to-peer teaching models are great ways to encourage youth to teach others what they learned.
- Help them navigate situations and systems, especially for marginalized youth. They and their families are more likely not to understand how to navigate the system. For example, have a new family in your program or club? Do they know others? Do they understand the expectations? What do they need to do to participate? When to be there? Where to be? Do they comprehend the internal cultural expectations of the club/program? Make sure to take the time to help them learn and navigate things.
- Connect them to resources; not all youth and families have the same access to resources. Help youth thrive by connecting them to the resources they need to participate fully or succeed as an individual. This may also mean helping their families connect to resources so the young person is fully supported at home and in their community. I often say a "Young person cannot thrive if their family is failing". Be a resource and help them connect with people or organizations that can help them access the resources they need to be stable and supported. We know from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs that base resources are critical for learning and thriving.
- Help young people get out of their own way. Help them overcome negative self-talk or negative narratives about themselves or their ability to accomplish something. For example, a youth says "I am dumb" remind them that is a false statement and say something like, "No you just haven't learned it yet" Remind them we are always consistently learning, and we all have different sets of information we know, and the goal is continuous learning.
- Help them learn to push through complex tasks and hard situations. Help them learn socioemotional regulation when they get frustrated and help them find ways to overcome difficulties. When they encounter problems, talk them through them, ask questions that help them arrive at their own answer and help them think through options and scenarios, help them figure out the consequences, good or bad. What other options do they have? What are the different pathways to different solutions?
- Teach them how to navigate conflict. Role model positive conflict resolution. Remember how you navigate conflict in your program, club, or with other adults and youth is essential. Be a good role model in navigating conflict, and demonstrate how to work with others, even when you disagree in approaching difficult conversations or situations. Are you teaching youth the goal is resolution and moving forward? Please remember that when egos get in the way of helping one resolve conflict, one is setting a negative example. Reflect and analyze how you are modeling conflict resolution and demonstrating self-responsibility so young people can learn positive conflict resolution.
- Support equity and youth from backgrounds that experience discrimination and prejudice. Validate their experiences, show your willingness to understand and empathize, and do not minimize their experience or its impact on them. Stand up and show them that behavior is unacceptable, and your willingness to speak up and allow them to have a voice in the matter empower them to share what they feel comfortable sharing.

Share Power: Avoid being that adult that tells them what to do and be the one to include and value their abilities to contribute. Share power by

- Sharing responsibilities with young people. Asking them to help, do things alongside them, and make sure you have them assist in ways meaningful to them.

- Elevate their voice and choices. Be willing to listen and hear and understand what is important to them. What would they like to see, hear, and do? Then work to do the things they are interested in. If it is not possible, then take the time to explain why not. Make sure to take their ideas seriously and not be dismissive. Allow youth to provide feedback and make sure to incorporate their feedback. Give youth credit and help youth implement their ideas.
- Respect their perspectives. Practice listening. Seek to understand where a young person may come from, even if their view differs from yours. The world is quickly evolving, and our childhood experiences vary, so take the time to respect their thoughts and feelings and what it is like growing up in today's world. Ask questions, be curious, be respectful, and let young people know you are trying to understand, even if you disagree.
- Apologize – be willing to demonstrate we are all human and make mistakes. Be willing to admit when you made a mistake and apologize when you are wrong and demonstrate your ability to take self-responsibility for one's actions. Demonstrate commitment to change and do better. Young people learn from our mistakes when we can model conflict management and self-responsibility.
- Give young people choices whenever possible. For younger youth, giving multiple options such as A, B or C options may be more age-appropriate. For older youth, it may include openly discussing what they value, want to learn about, and want to do. Helping them brainstorm and narrow down choices. It is about facilitating and guiding them.
- Build Leadership and Democracy. Do not boss youth around. Instead, provide opportunities for youth to be engaged in ways that are meaningful to them. Allow them to lead while providing mentorship and guidance (after all, they are still learning). Do not set them up for failure by not providing the support they need to learn and grow. Ensure they are part of the decision-making process.

Expand Possibilities: Help young people broaden their world by

- Expand their possibilities by exposing them to as many careers and opportunities as possible. Introduce young people to different career pathways, including those needing higher education degrees and vocational-technical careers. Invite people from various career backgrounds to speak at your club/program. Ensure the individuals you invite to reflect the different backgrounds of the youth you serve.
- Connect young people – help them build a network. Help youth develop their social capital. Help them network and make connections with others they can learn from and help them develop their network, and provide youth with the resources they need to pursue their goals and dreams.
- Ensure youth have the information they need. Ensure young people have the information and knowledge to pursue their dreams and goals. For example, do they understand what it will take to pursue their dreams and goals? Do they understand how to apply to college? Do they know how to pursue an apprenticeship? Connect to vocational-technical careers? Do they know how to obtain scholarships? Help young people connect to the resources and knowledge they need to pursue their goals successfully. Take field trips to help them explore possibilities.
- Provide culturally relevant and responsive programming. Ensure you incorporate diversity and ensure youth can see themselves in the programming. For example, are diverse youth reflected in the images posted, the books available, and the teaching lessons utilized? Promote different aspects of diversity, race, ethnicity, age, gender, gender identity, gender expression, culture, ability, etc. Teach youth to learn to function in an increasingly global and diverse world by helping youth learn about and respect other cultures.
- When you see a youth is interested in something, help them learn more and make connections. Recommend ways they can learn more and help them get the resources they need to ensure they can further engage in content areas they enjoy.

“You can't be what you can't see” is a saying that reminds me of the importance of expanding the world for youth. Youth can never have the opportunity to pursue a career that might be their spark/passion if they never become aware of its existence. So make sure youth have exposure to all the possibilities possible so they can pursue their spark/passion in life.

According to the Search Institute, 86% of adults surveyed reported being intentional about building relationships, yet only 46% of youth reported having a strong developmental relationship with an adult. So let's improve youth outcomes by closing the gap and intentionally implementing the best practices for building positive relationships with young people to help improve youth outcomes.

Did you know? Having one caring adult is even more critical for LGBTQ+ youth. A national report shows having just one supportive and caring adult who is gender-affirming of a youth's gender identity can reduce suicide attempts by 40%. (The Trevor Project, 2019)

For youth who endure trauma, building authentic caring relationships with adults can help youth overcome hardships and build resilience by being an extender of their support network.

In conclusion, be intentional about building a positive relationship with them and help them know they can come to you to talk and seek support.

Take the [Relationship Check Quiz](#) to assess how you are doing in being intentional about building positive relationships with young people.

Call to Action: What will you do to ensure all volunteers, staff, and others involved in youth programs or clubs understand the importance and best practices for demonstrating to youth adults care, value and support them fully and in authentic ways?

References

Search Institute. (2023). Developmental Relationships Help Youth Thrive. Obtained from <https://info.searchinstitute.org/developmental-relationships-help-young-people-thrive>

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