

Defining Webs of Support: A New Framework to Advance Understanding of Relationships and Youth Development

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“Human development takes place inexorably, inextricably in relationship, in a medium that is always moving, a tide of change.”¹

Introduction

Relationships are the foundation upon which all youth development rests. Young people grow, learn, and develop through relationships. Relationships socialize youth and subsequently encourage identity development.² Relationships provide connection, a necessity for all humans.^{3,4} Supportive relationships promote positive academic, behavioral, and psychological outcomes,⁵ while also buffering against negative outcomes such as substance abuse.^{6,7} Relationships are the vehicle that propel adolescent development forward.

Traditionally, there has been a schism in how developmental scientists study relationships, with studies focused either on relationship quality and supports within dyads (with one other person) or general structures of relationships and social capital across social networks. While these lines of research provide considerable insight into the power of relationships, resources, and networks for youth development, each approach raises important questions that could be addressed by the other. Therefore, several researchers have recently begun to examine youth-adult dyads from a developmental systems perspective. From this perspective, each person in a relationship influences and is influenced by the other person and each dyadic relationship is embedded within a broader ecology of relationships, supports, opportunities, and barriers.^{8,9,10} Building on this work, the authors take the perspective that these streams of research need to be further integrated to provide a more accurate depiction of how relationships affect youth development.

In this brief, the authors present a *web of support framework* to describe how youth relate to adults and peers in their lives and how these relationships provide the developmental supports necessary for young people to be on a positive developmental trajectory. The authors also discuss implications and pose larger questions about the use of this framework in research and practice.

A web of support framework details the connections between relationships and supports in a young person's life.

Layers of Ecological Systems Theory

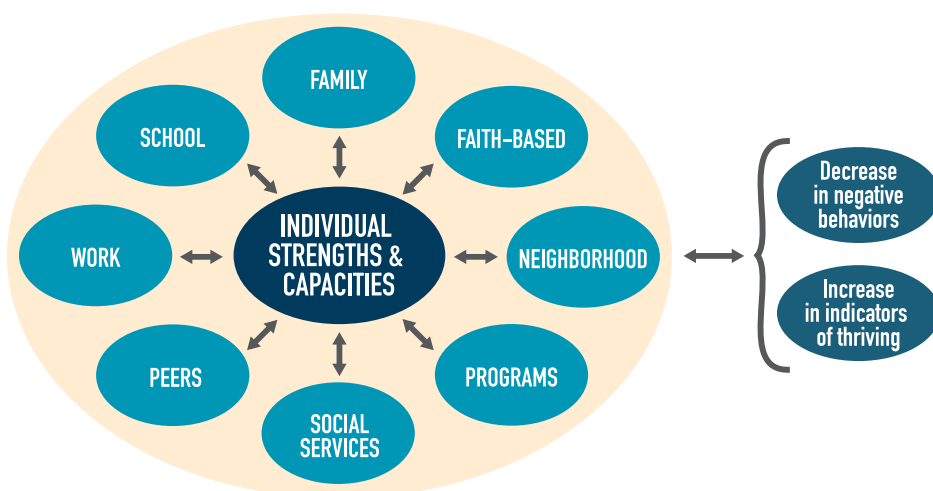
Youth development and overall human development are defined by the dynamic relationship between a person and her/his context.¹¹ Context, though, is not a homogeneous construct. Rather, youth are embedded within a multilayered ecology, within which the young person is an active agent continually influencing and being influenced by relationships with people, institutions, and the broader environment.¹² This development dynamic has been called a **youth system**.¹³ When the needs and strengths of a young person are aligned with the assets and supports in a community, a young person is considered to be embedded within a **supportive youth system**, an ecological system that increases the probability that youth will be on a positive developmental trajectory (e.g., academic, social-emotional, physical, vocational, and civic trajectories).

Relationships constitute the foundation of any youth system. Families, schools, youth development organizations, health care institutions, and other characteristics of a community are considered to be contexts, but they are filled with the people with whom young people relate every day. Like any other aspect of a youth system, relationships between a youth and others do not occur in isolation. Rather, all of these relationships are embedded within an ecology of relationships. Therefore, any given relationship is influencing and being influenced by other relationships.^{14,15}

Although any dyadic relationship is embedded within an ecology of relationships, much of relational research examines the individual dyad.¹⁶ More recent efforts have called for the explicit recognition and examination of how the dyadic relationship is embedded within a broader ecology. For example, a study of parents' roles in mentoring relationships found that parents who felt more connected to their child's mentor often approached the mentoring relationship more collaboratively, whereas parents who did not feel connected to the mentor sometimes hindered the mentoring relationship.¹⁷ Studies like this demonstrate the need to conduct broader examinations of young people's ecologies to better support development.

There's a breadth of research regarding youth social networks and social capital that focuses on the structure of relationships in youth people's lives. These networks of relationships provide a constellation of social supports youth need

Figure 1: Positive Youth Development from a Supportive Youth System Perspective^A



A Zaff, J. F., Pufall Jones, E., Donlan, A. E., & Anderson, S. (2016). Comprehensive community initiatives creating supportive youth systems: A theoretical rationale for creating youth-focused CCIs. In J.F. Zaff, E. Pufall Jones, A. E. Donlan, & S. Anderson (Eds.), *Comprehensive community initiatives for positive youth development* (pp. 1-12). New York, NY: Rutledge.

to thrive. However, this line of research does not provide insight into the development, content, or quality of the relationships within those networks. And although agency is a primary tenant in developmental theory¹⁸ and developmental research has focused on supporting youth as active agents of their own development,^{19,20} social network and social capital theories also do not recognize the agency of youth in those relationships. Youth agency is a primary tenant in developmental theory,²¹ and developmental research has focused on supporting youth as active agents of their own development.^{22,23}

The authors call the intersection of a multilayered ecology filled with a network of relationships that provide social supports a **web of support**. This framework is composed of three key layers, each of which contributes to a young person's development: relationships, resources, and networks/social capital.

Relationships

The vast majority of the empirical research on relationships has examined how one important adult^B can impact a young person's behavioral, psychological, academic, and emotional development.^{24,25} These studies focus on single dyads in single ecologies (e.g., schools, mentoring programs). This research provides many insights about dyadic relationships between youth and adults. For example, higher emotional support from parents appears linked to increases in positive psychological outcomes (e.g., self-esteem) and decreases in negative outcomes (e.g., depression).²⁶ Moreover, in teacher-student relationships, teacher investment appears important for fostering connection and is related to academic motivation and engagement.²⁷ Studies indicate that successful mentoring relationships—characterized by authenticity, companionship, trust, reciprocity, attunement, and collaboration—are linked to increases in positive outcomes such as academic engagement.^{28,29} Clearly, it is important for youth to have strong supportive relationships with adults in every context. Yet, researchers know little about how these dyadic relationships, which are embedded within a broader ecology, are related to one another.

Understanding how these relationships are interrelated may offer insight on how to most effectively support youth. For example, one study found that afterschool program staff could use knowledge of proximal relational ties in young people's lives (e.g., with peers, teachers, and parents) to provide support and conflict resolution.³⁰ More recently, some mentoring research has moved toward a systems perspective, considering the interconnectedness between parents, other adults (e.g., social workers), mentors, and youth in mentoring relationships.^{31,32,33} These studies have provided great insight into the impact that other adults' beliefs and actions can have on mentoring relationships and how mentoring relationships might impact the ecologies in which they are embedded. Most recently, prominent mentoring researchers proposed a mentoring framework that promotes broader connections between youth and various adults by training young people to recognize potential mentors in their lives while strengthening both individual and environmental assets. This, in turn, allows them to make more intentional connections.³⁴ This framework, when used in mentoring programs, could greatly expand the reach and impact of those programs.³⁵ Yet more research needs to be conducted to develop an understanding of the broader ecology in which youth are embedded and the wider range of relationships outside of traditional mentoring programs that could provide youth with support. Research that intentionally examines the constellation of supportive adults in young people's lives across contexts is necessary to truly understand their relationship with youth development.

What is a Web of Support?

Center for Promise researchers first used this term in the 2015 report *Don't Quit on Me* to describe the collection of individuals within and outside family that provides a young person with varying levels and types of support.

Supporters may be adults or peers. All are connected to the young person, and may also be connected to one another through formal or informal networks (for example, as members of a program cohort or an alumni group).

^B Peers are also important sources of support for youth but this brief focuses primarily on youth-adult relationships.

Resources

Social supports, which encompasses a wide range of resources (see Table 1), are associated with positive psychosocial and behavioral outcomes.^{36,37} Social support can come from adults in different contexts (e.g., parents, teachers, mentors, coaches),³⁸ and there are multiple forms of social support that function differently in response to different types of problems (e.g., advice or guidance vs. concrete help).³⁹ Due to the multidimensional nature of social support, much of the research previously conducted has focused on dyads in single contexts (e.g., teacher-student relationships)⁴⁰ with single types of support. This approach has limited the field's understanding of how to foster this important resource in youth-adult relationships.^{41,42} Emerging research shows that multiple adults from different contexts can each be comprehensive sources of social support for youth. The same type of social support, however, could manifest in a different way depending on the adult providing it.⁴³ For example, one study found that teachers in their study provided emotional support by offering an open and non-judgmental space for youth to vent and a feeling of caring, whereas family members often followed up emotional support with advice, which made emotional support functionally different from teachers and family members.⁴⁴ In previous research from the Center for Promise, the combination of emotional support from school-based adults and parents, and instrumental support from out-of-school adults were most predictive of positive school engagement.⁴⁵ Taken together, these findings suggest that adopting an ecological systems approach to resources in a young person's network can shed light on how to effectively foster and bolster these important resources for youth.

Table 1. Social Support

Type	Definition
Emotional Support	Allow discussion of feelings, expression of concerns/worries; indicate sympathy, approval, caring, acceptance of person.
Instrumental support	Provide money, household goods, tools, transportation, child care, assistance with cooking, cleaning, shopping, repairs.
Informational support	Provide information about resources, suggest alternative courses or action, provide advice about effectiveness.
Companionship support	Provide partner for sports, outdoor activities, movies, theater, museums, restaurants, shopping, parties, trips.
Validation support	Provide consensus information re prevalence of problems, normativeness of individual's behavior/feelings, individual's relative status in population.

Social networks and social capital

Another way to consider youth-adult relationships is through one of several social network approaches. A **social network** refers to all of the people in a given social environment and the different relationships that tie them together.⁴⁶ According to social network theory, a young person's social network is comprised of all the people with whom the youth interacts in her/his ecology and the ties between those people.⁴⁷ Social network models emphasize either the structure or content of social networks.⁴⁸ In studies of youth development, social network, and social capital theories are often tied together because social capital is both a resource generated in social networks (i.e., bonding social capital)⁴⁹ as well as a tool for expanding social networks (i.e., bridging social capital).⁵⁰

Social capital is generally considered to be a set of social resources that are accessed and exchanged in relationships between people and institutions.⁵¹

- **Bonding, or exclusive, social capital** is the value (e.g., psychological resource) that is produced from connections between people who already know one another or share a common identity (e.g., family, culture).

- **Bridging, or inclusive, social capital** expands beyond the shared sense of identity of bonding social capital to include people from different groups. Bridging social capital networks provide social connections to external economic or social resources and are useful for spreading information across religious, class, and ethnic lines.⁵²

Studies suggest that social capital promotes positive youth outcomes such as academic achievement,^{53,54} educational attainment,⁵⁵ extracurricular participation,⁵⁶ and self-concept,⁵⁷ while also buffering negative youth outcomes such as substance abuse⁵⁸ and dropping out of school.⁵⁹ The assumption in many studies of social capital is that adults with higher levels of education and income provide young people with access and exposure to resources and networks otherwise not available to the youth. This exposure is subsequently useful for young people's educational and professional advancement.⁶⁰ However, social capital has been ill-defined empirically, with no standard definition or measurement. Some studies consider social capital to be an economic resource (e.g., socio economic status), while others consider social capital to be a psychological resource (e.g., emotional support, validation). Moreover, most studies on social capital for youth have had less focus on the actual relationships that underlie the interactions necessary to produce social capital.⁶¹ As a result, previous research on social capital in youth-adult relationships has often not furthered our understanding of how social capital is developed and produced in these relationships.

“A social network refers to all of the people in a given social environment and the different relationships that tie them together.”

Some studies have recently begun to disentangle the characteristics of social capital and have suggested that psychological resources (e.g., bonding, expansion of networks) and individual characteristics (e.g., social competence) are implicated in developing and exchanging social capital.^{62,63} Furthermore, one study suggests that including youth agency, an essential component in youth systems theory, could improve assessment, analysis, and promotion of social capital in youth-adult relationships.⁶⁴ These studies have expanded our understanding of how social capital is fostered, accessed, and exchanged in youth-adult relationships. More extensive research that intentionally examines the underlying relationships and characteristics as well as the functions of social capital in youths' networks is necessary. Ultimately, the structural aspects of network and social capital theories are helpful for studying youth development from an ecological frame that can be used to determine potential sources of support for youth, understand how dyads within a network are related to other agents in a network, and to understand how to expand a young persons' network.⁶⁵

While prior research has established the essentiality of relationships, resources, and social networks and social capital as approaches for examining youth development, each approach raises questions that could be informed by integrating the other approaches if they were framed within ecological systems theories. Drawing on these different theories and previous research from the Center for Promise,⁶⁶ the authors propose a web of support framework that start with these beliefs:

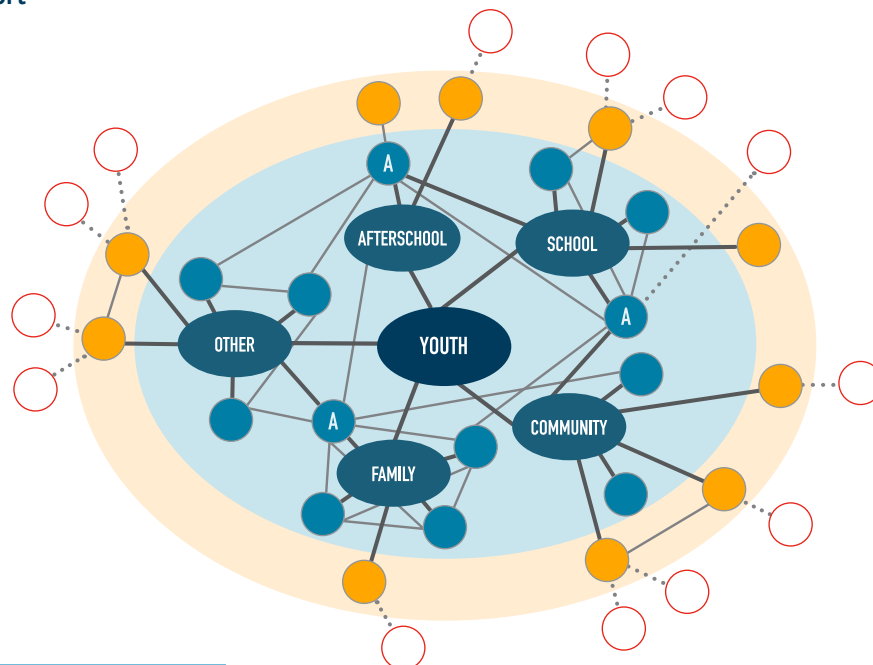
- All individuals have agency.
- The individual is embedded within a multilayered ecology, and every actor within each layer of the ecology and the relationships of those agents with the youth are also embedded within this multilayered ecology.
- Each actor has the potential to provide one or more social supports for the youth.
- The youth has at least one person who rises above the rest, because she/he perceives this person as a source of unconditional support.

A Web of Support

A web of support refers to the network of relationships young people have with adults and peers across contexts in which supports are provided that help the young person advance in development. This brief focuses on youth-adult relationships. This framework considers:

- **Youth agency and characteristics.** Consistent with youth systems⁶⁷ and ecological theories,⁶⁸ the authors assume youth are active agents in their own development and therefore intentionally engage or disengage from agents within the web. Further, their characteristics (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, internal assets) also determine the level of effectiveness of any support.
- **Relationships among all adults and peers within the web.** Consistent with ecological theory,⁶⁹ the authors not only consider the ways in which all agents within a web are related to an individual youth, the authors also consider the ways in which each actor is related to other agents within the web. The connections between adults in the web can shed light on the embeddedness of each relationship. Further, considering all relationships between adults allows for the inclusion of agents who are not directly related to the youth but instead are potential sources of support the youth may be connected to (i.e. bridged) through others in the web. Additionally, consistent with social network and social capital theory,⁷⁰ the authors take into account the frequency of interactions amongst all agents in the web, which allows for the distinction between relationships that are long-lasting (i.e. strong ties) and relationships that are more fleeting (i.e. weak ties).
- **Supports provided.** Consistent with social support literature, the authors recognize that all adults, regardless of their position in the web, have the potential to provide at least one support to youth. Moreover, the authors consider how the support provided by one adult might impact the support provided by another adult within the web.
- **Variation in importance.** While all adults in a web can provide support for youth, certain adults might be elevated in the young person's mind. There can be multiple adults who reach this elevated level in young people's webs but the authors hypothesize that youth need at least one adult at this level for effective development. The authors characterization of these adults is described.

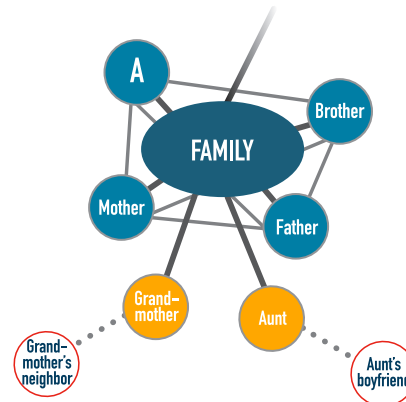
Figure 2. Web of support



Structure of the web: Strong ties, weak ties, and cores

All webs of support have two types of relationships, **strong ties and weak ties**.⁷¹ Strong ties tend to develop over long periods of time and are enduring (e.g., parents, extended family members, close friends). Clusters of strong ties constitute a **core**. Individuals in a core engage in consistent interaction with the youth and other core individuals making the core of the web interconnected and structurally sound, or resilient. This optimal structure means that disturbances to a core such as a teacher leaving school or a sibling moving away for college do not collapse the core. Rather, consistent with tenets of relational developmental systems and universal resiliency theories, the core adapts to continue to support the youth. A web of support inevitably has multiple cores; one in each developmental context.

Figure 3. Example of a core within a web



It is possible for youth to have a core in family, school, work, program, out-of-school, and all other contexts. In this way, supportive adults are not viewed as removed from their contexts, as it is likely that the support they provide the youth is tied to the context. Core adults likely provide youth with supports that come together to satisfy the young persons' needs in that context. However, each core may contain an adult who rises above the rest, who is characterized as an **anchor**. While youth likely feel close to and supported by all of the people in their cores, the anchor is:

- The one person they feel they could go to for anything.
- The person who can help youth navigate throughout individual contexts and/or bridge them to other contexts.
- The person who provides an all-encompassing sense of unconditional support.
- The person who provides youth with a sense that they are heard and matter.

While some members of the core can provide some of these functions, the anchor is the person the youth most often leans on because the anchor provides all of the previously described functions. Previous research^{72,73} suggests that youth should have at least one anchor in their web, but optimal development might call for an anchor in all of the primary contexts in which youth are engaged. It is possible for a group of adults to collectively provide the kind of support a single anchor typically provides. For some youth, one person can embody all of these important characteristics; for others, several agents within a core fulfill these needs.

At the periphery of each core are people with whom youth have weaker ties. Weak ties tend to fade in and out of youths' lives, although they have the potential to develop into strong ties (e.g., neighbors, friend of a friend). People on the periphery have fewer interactions with the youth, and though they may also be connected to other individuals in the young person's core, those on the periphery likely have entirely different core networks of their own. A key function of adults on the periphery is to provide youth with connections to different networks than adults in the core might have

(i.e., bridging social capital), though core adults can also provide bridging social capital. Likewise, peripheral adults can also provide different types of social supports.

The size (number) and density (level of interconnection) of each web depends on several things: the availability of adults in young people's ecologies, institutional support for youth-adult relationships, and cultural factors (e.g., Latinx cultures place a heavy emphasis on family connectedness and are likely to have highly interconnected family cores). The type of support provided by the web depends on the young person's individual attributes and developmental phase, history, and context. For example, on the topic of cross-race mentoring relationships in the United States, it is helpful to consider that some youth of color may feel a cultural distrust toward White adults because of the history of discrimination and oppression of people of color in this country, the effects of which are still relevant.⁷⁴ Researchers further posit that this cultural distrust may prevent youth of color from forming new relationships with cross-race adults in program settings.⁷⁵ Though several practices have been highlighted that can ease this barrier, including cultural competency training,⁷⁶ it is important to understand such cultural factors may exist. The proposed structure of a web of support represents an optimal structure; the authors acknowledge that a wide variety of web structures are possible, many of which currently exist and are supportive for youth. Therefore, the authors encourage the consideration of different web structures in research and practice. Further uses and inquiries of this framework are discussed below.

Implications and Inquiries

By using a web of support framework, areas of inquiry can be expanded to provide a more thorough understanding about what young people need in their lives in order to thrive. For example, research on educational achievement and attainment has focused on the effects of the dyadic relationship between youth and teachers⁷⁷ or parents⁷⁸ or peers,⁷⁹ among other individuals in a young person's life. Although considering the unique influence that a given person can have on a young person's educational outcomes is important, the effect of any relationship will inevitably be influenced by the other relationships that a youth has in her life. For instance, youth who have a warm, encouraging relationship with their parents will possibly have an easier time connecting with and deriving benefits from their teachers. On the other hand, youth who have neglectful or abusive parents can have a more difficult time bonding with their teachers.⁸⁰ Thus, considering a young person's web of support can change the way practitioners think about positioning themselves to assist youth and inform the resources they seek out for the youth. Likewise, this framework can change the way that a researcher approaches studies on how a relationship can benefit youth development.

When does a web of support promote positive youth development?

This discussion of a web of support is enmeshed in the idea of a positive web of support, which is based on society's beliefs and values of what positive development looks like for youth. However, simply having a web of supportive adults and peers might not necessarily produce positive developmental outcomes, as defined by societal norms. For instance, much research has demonstrated that youth facing large amounts of adversity sometimes seek gang membership for survival;⁸¹ find companionship, social support, and acceptance in gangs;^{82,83} and have higher self-esteem than non-gang youth.⁸⁴ While webs that include gangs may be adaptive for an individual young person in the short term, these webs ultimately remain maladaptive for long-term outcomes and for broader society.⁸⁵ To understand how to optimize webs of support for all youth, it is important to better understand how different positive and negative agents in a web work together or against one another and how they affect developmental outcomes.

How is one adult's support related to the support in the rest of the web?

All agents in the web are part of an interconnected system.⁸⁶ This assumption maintains that one adult's provision of support exerts some level of influence on the surrounding agents' (including the young person's) actions. However, it is unclear how one adult's support impacts young people's support-seeking behaviors and their feelings of needing support. Further, it is unclear how one adult's support for a young person impacts other adults' provision of support in the web. Gaining insight in this area has implications for formal and informal mentoring,⁸⁷ student-teacher relationships,⁸⁸ and relationships within after-school settings,⁸⁹ among others. More research needs to be conducted on the relationships and interactions between adults in a web to better document the ripple effect each actor has on the young person's web of support.

How would public policy questions be reframed using a web of support framework?

The topic of school choice serves as an example of how the web of support framework can be applied to public policy topics. Using this framework could refine the way that policymakers and evaluators develop policies to support youth or assess the effectiveness of such policies. School choice provides a compelling example. In school choice models, whether through bussing, charters, or vouchers, youth often attend schools that are not in their neighborhoods or within walking distance of their neighborhoods. Therefore, youth may travel a considerable geographic distance from their family and neighborhood cores which provide support they need, to new cores at school, making connections between cores difficult to establish.⁹⁰ If the connections across cores are indeed important, then policymakers would need to be aware of the barriers that school choice may pose to young people's webs and subsequent development. Policymakers could then use this knowledge to develop ways to promote linkages between home and school cores, particularly in recognition of geographical barriers. Similarly, practitioners might consider opportunities to improve connections. For evaluations of school choice models, variations in impacts on academic outcomes and overall well-being could be a function of connections between home and school cores, or other relationships in a young person's life. For instance, the strength of connections between schools and families, or between the broader adult and peer networks in a neighborhood and the school community could be implicated in a young person's academic success. Therefore, taking into account a web of support framework could illuminate why a program is having differential impacts on young people and provide insights into how to improve the program.

Conclusion

Frameworks for understanding the effects of relationships on the lives of children and youth have either focused on the depth of one-to-one relationships or on the breadth of social networks. This paper presents an integrated framework of various literatures showing that webs of support recognize that youth are active agents in relationships, their relationships are embedded within a broader ecology of relationships (and other supports), and different adults will provide different sets of social supports. Importantly, webs of support are not considered to be diffuse networks. Instead, relationships in a web of support tend to be clustered within contexts (e.g., home, school), and youth need to negotiate those relationships across contexts. This framework may provoke different ways to consider empirical inquiries about relationships and overall youth development, and inform how practitioners and policymakers consider and develop the most effective strategies for supporting youth.

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About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise is the applied research institute for America's Promise Alliance, housed at the Boston University School of Education and dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

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About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest network dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. We bring together more than 400 national organizations and thousands of community leaders to focus the nation's attention on young people's lives and voices, lead bold campaigns to expand opportunity, conduct groundbreaking research on what young people need to thrive, and accelerate the adoption of strategies that help young people succeed. GradNation, our signature campaign, mobilizes Americans to increase the nation's high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020. In the past 12 years, an additional 2 million young people have graduated from high school.

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