

BUILDING BLOCK 2:

RELATIONSHIPS

Talk with young people about their families, and notice ways that kids are supported and loved by their family members.

- Fairbanks educator



BUILDING BLOCK 2: RELATIONSHIPS

Build connections with students and families

Building trusting relationships can help families and school staff to authentically work together. These connections help each partner value the other and develop a shared understanding of how to work as a team. Relationships are critical for addressing mistrust some families experience toward the educational system and serve as a foundation for solving problems and resolving conflict.

Key Concepts and Research

Relationships are built over time, often through small but consistent actions that show caring or interest in another person.

RELATIONSHIPS AS CORE MUSCLES:

To succeed in basketball, running, yoga, or Alaska Native Youth Olympics, we must first build our muscles and reflexes. We strengthen our core – the back and abdominal muscles that prepare us for any physical challenge that might arise. Relationships are the “core” of our partnerships; they are the muscles that strengthen and prepare us to work as a team toward student success.



Like our core, trusting relationships take time to build, and they provide a foundation of strength and stability for navigating unexpected challenges and taking on higher goals.

Research supports the importance of strong relationships. In Chicago, researchers found that trust among school staff and families is a key predictor of school performance.¹ The Search Institute, which studies and promotes “what kids need to succeed,” explains:

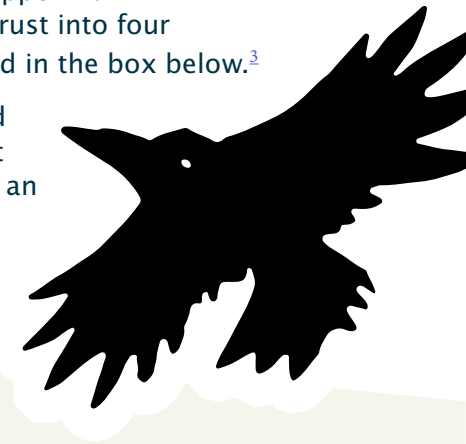
If relationships are, in fact, the “active ingredient” in successful interventions they are neither fluff nor a distraction from what really matters. We cannot leave relationship quality to chance. We need to become more intentional in forming, strengthening, and sustaining the web of transformative relationships in the lives of children and youth.²

Authentic relationships occur when people can bring their whole selves and feel seen as a whole person. Such relationships are built on **trust**, which in turn is built on sincerity, reliability, competence, and care. Organizational development coach Charles Feltman defines trust as “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable

to another person’s actions.” In the case of education, families are being asked to make their children – and themselves – vulnerable to educators and the education system. Teachers and staff, in deepening partnerships with families, are being asked to make their practice vulnerable to families’ input and judgment.

Feltman notes that trust doesn’t just happen. It takes attention. Feltman breaks down trust into four components, or “distinctions,” described in the box below.³

Feltman says, “It can take time to build relationships and common goals. Trust happens over time – baby steps. Bring an attitude of openness to the table.”



THE FOUR DISTINCTIONS OF TRUST

CHARLES FELTMAN

SINCERITY the assessment that you are honest, that you say what you mean and mean what you say; you can be believed and taken seriously. It also means when you express an opinion it is valid, useful, and is backed up by sound thinking and evidence. Finally, it means that your actions will align with your words.

RELIABILITY the assessment that you meet the commitments you make, that you keep your promises.

COMPETENCE the assessment that you have the ability to do what you are doing or propose to do. In the workplace this usually means the other person believes you have the requisite capacity, skill, knowledge, and resources to do a particular task or job.

CARE the assessment that you have the other person’s interests in mind as well as your own when you make decisions and take actions. Of the four assessments of trustworthiness, care is in some ways the most important for building lasting trust. When people believe you are only concerned with your self-interest and don’t consider their interests as well, they may trust your sincerity, reliability and competence, but they will tend to limit their trust of you to specific situations or transactions. On the other hand, when people believe you hold their interest in mind, they will extend their trust more broadly to you.

Relationships in Action: Not One-Size-Fits-All

Sarah, a longtime Alaska high school teacher, puts relationships with students and families at the heart of her teaching. She describes how she forms relationships with families:

In the summer, as soon as I get my class list, I email families to say, *Hi, I'm Sarah*, and to ask them to send me a little information about their kid ahead of time: *What do I need to know to greet your kid on the first day?*

Families sometimes share really important information, such as *my kid is struggling with their best friend*, or *we're getting divorced*. The email also tells me whose email address doesn't work and that I need to get for future communications.

I also try to email or call each parent or family member early in the school year to start off with a positive report like, *Hey, this really awesome thing happened today. I saw your kid help another student open his locker*. This is especially important for me if I know a particular student usually gets in trouble.

And families sometimes say to me, *No teacher has ever told me they liked my kid*, or *No teacher has ever called me with something positive*. They usually wait until the end of the call, waiting for me to say something bad.

Some parents actually cry when they realize there is no bad news. **I work really hard to find something positive to share.**

Or I'll call and say, *I noticed something that worked really well for your kid*, and share a specific successful strategy, so we can then team up to support the student.

Sometimes families have such a negative impression of school from their own experience, especially some Alaska Native families. So for some families, I take our meetings someplace neutral to meet: *Hey, let's meet for coffee at ...*

And when I take time to organize events outside school, I am amazed at how many family members are willing to help; they offer to make cookies or help set up. I organized a spooky story reading at the beach around Halloween, and so many families you'd never see at school or parent-teacher conferences showed up to hear their kids read their scary stories. **They all care about their kids and want to show up for them.** I try not to do one-size-fits-all because every kid and every family has their own story.



Analysis: Not One-Size-Fits-All

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE?

- When does Sarah begin her family outreach?
- How does Sarah show families she cares about their students?
- How does Sarah build positive relationships with families of students who tend to get in trouble?
- How does Sarah support families in their own relationship with their student?
- In what ways is Sarah flexible and creative about family engagement?
- How does Sarah acknowledge the history of trauma in education and its ongoing legacy?
- Why does Sarah organize events outside of school? What are the impacts?
- What beliefs does Sarah hold that help her build relationships with families?
- How might Sarah's efforts to find something positive about each student affect her own attitude toward her students?

WHAT MORE COULD SARAH DO?

- How could Sarah support her colleagues in developing more authentic relationships with families?
- How could Sarah work with her colleagues to make sure each student has at least three caring adults at the school to support them?

PERSONAL EXTENSION:

- Which of Sarah's strategies might be applicable to your own practice?
- Have you noticed a difference in your relationships when you lead with positive feedback about a student?
- How can you create a more systematic or intentional approach to relationship-building?



Tools and Strategies

Alaska educators share strategies for building positive relationships with families:

BUILD ON LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND VALUES:

Each region and many communities in Alaska have values and ways of sharing knowledge. Learn about these values and how families discuss values and expectations.

BE PART OF THE COMMUNITY: Participate or volunteer in activities and events where families are gathering. This can include harvesting foods, community meetings, ceremonies, or other community events.

WELCOME ALL. Use the classroom or school as a hub for family activities and social events. Create fun and openness in the classroom.

CONNECT WITH CARING AND SIGNIFICANT ADULTS in your students' lives. Get contact information and permission forms at the beginning of the year to reach out to other significant adults.

SHOW YOU CARE. Reach out personally to hard-to-reach adults and their extended network. Ask for others in your school or community to use their connections, if appropriate.

SCHEDULE OUT-OF-SCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES for families and students that match their interests and expertise.

CULTIVATE A LEARNER'S MINDSET. Ask family members about their child, and work to better understand their child's strengths and needs as well as what resources the families bring to your school community.

BE CREATIVE. Use multiple approaches to share updates on student progress and school activities, including students sharing their own progress.

LISTEN DEEPLY. Have many conversations with groups in the community and with smaller family groups.

SHOW HUMILITY. Acknowledge the history of education in Alaska and the lasting mistrust created by policies such as family separations, punishment for speaking Alaska Native languages, and abuse.



When a teacher came over to my house just to visit I was surprised (and a little uncomfortable), but I knew they cared enough to get to know us. My daughter thought it was fun too.

-Alaska parent

Often I waited to build relationships with families until something went wrong, and then it is hard to do. Now I am going to start building relationships at the beginning of the year so that when things get hard, we have something to build on.

-School Counselor

Parent-Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) is a national organization that builds relationships, skills, and engagement for families, educators, and students from pre-K to 12th grade.

PTHV offers evidence-based training and support for developing and deepening school-family relationships.

The Search Institute offers a research-based framework for building relationships with families.⁴ The focus is on strengthening developmental relationships within the family (i.e., between parents or caregivers and children) as well as the home-school relationship. The Search Institute summarizes its core strategies as follows:

1. Listen first to families to help determine the best ways to partner.
2. Focus on building relationships with families and students, rather than focusing on activities.
3. Highlight families' strengths, even amid challenges, rather than adopting and designing approaches based on deficits.
4. Encourage families to experiment with new practices that build relationships with their child, rather than giving them expert advice on what they need to do.

5. Emphasize the importance of caring, supportive adults and provide opportunities to strengthen those relationships.
6. Broaden coalitions focused on young people's success to actively engage families as a focal point for strengthening developmental relationships.

The Flamboyant Foundation and Harvard Family Research Project offer strategies and key insights for building relationships with families.⁵ These include the following:

- Treat families in respectful and culturally sensitive ways and invite their engagement in the school.
- Understand each family's hopes and dreams for their child.
- Create a plan together to help families work toward this vision.
- Understand key strategies for building trust.
- Establish a meaningful home-to-school communication system with multiple modes of communication to meet different families' needs.
- Have a means to reach all families and be reached by all families in a timely way.
- Communicate with all families in a way that is accessible and easy to understand.
- Build a solid foundation with families so you can problem solve together.
- Learn from and about families to improve learning in the classroom.

Signs of Success and Growth

- Families report feeling heard and valued.
- Families share their knowledge, expertise, and stories with you.
- Adults in the community let students know school is important.
- Teachers and staff show personal regard for all families.
- Teachers seek input from families and listen carefully.
- Families trust staff to have their students' interests at heart.
- Families and students feel the school is a welcoming place for families like theirs.
- Students, school staff, and families believe they are on the same team.

Reflection Questions

Consider your school and community. You may want to discuss these questions with a colleague or community member, reflect on them on your own, or journal about them.

- How do I show personal regard for families and acknowledge their strengths?
- How do I build an authentic relationship?
- What are the roles and responsibilities each family member plays in the life of my students?
- Do I keep my word and follow through on commitments I make to families?
- How can I ensure families have a way to share their students' strengths and needs with me?
- How do I know if families feel valued and heard?
- What does cultural and personal humility look like when working with families?

