

Project Report

Empowering Children for Life: A Preliminary Report

Renee Spencer, M.S.S.W., Ed.M.,
Judith Jordan, Ph.D., &
Jenny Sazama, B.A.



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Wellesley College
Wellesley, MA 02481

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Renée Spencer, M.S.S.W., Ed.M.
Judith Jordan, Ph.D.
Jenny Sazama, B.A.

About the Authors

Renée Spencer, M.S.S.W., Ed.M., is a clinical social worker and doctoral candidate in the Human Development and Psychology program at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. She is also the interim Coordinator of the Harvard Center on Gender and Education.

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D., is a Founding Scholar and the Co-Director of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Stone Center, Wellesley College. She is also an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School.

Jenny Sazama, B.A., is the Co-Director of Youth on Board, through which she provides curriculum development and training. Prior to this, she established and directed Youth in Action, a program that was designed to organize and empower teens to take leadership in their neighborhoods in Boston.

Abstract

In this first report from the Robert S. and Grace W. Stone Empowering Children for Life Primary Prevention Initiatives, we offer findings from a set of focus groups conducted with children and adolescents about their relationships with the important adults in their lives. Decades of research have demonstrated the link between relationships with caring adults and psychological health and well-being among children and adolescents, but little research to date has sought explicate the underlying processes involved in these key relationships. The purpose of this exploratory study was to listen to young people's descriptions of their experiences in, and understandings of, their relationships with the adults in their lives and to consider the ways in which Relational-Cultural Theory could inform the study of growth-fostering relationships between youth and adults. We conducted seven focus groups with ethnically and socio-economically diverse children and adolescents. These youth poignantly described their desire for strong relationships with adults and the barriers that unfortunately, and too often, seemed to get in the way.

Introduction¹

The importance of caring relationships with adults for the psychological development of children and adolescents has been repeatedly demonstrated across several areas of research within psychology (Rhodes, 2002). The power of the presence of "confiding" relationships for predicting psychological health among children faced with a range of adversities such as parental mental illness (e.g., Rutter, 1979) and child maltreatment (e.g., Cicchetti, 1989) has been highlighted in the developmental psychopathology and resilience literatures (Werner, 1984, 1990). The growing body of research on social support in childhood and adolescence has also found a strong link between good relationships with adults and children's and adolescents' psychological health and well-being (Cauce, Mason, Gonzales, Hiraga, & Liu, 1994; Cotterell, 1992), even into late adolescence (Holahan, Valentiner, & Moos, 1995). The link between what have been called "good" (Grossman & Johnson, 1999), "supportive" (Resnick et al., 1997; Cauce et al., 1994; Harter, 1998), and "confiding" or "caring" (Wyman et al., 1999) relationships and greater psychological health and vitality has been firmly established.

How do these relationships with adults promote psychological health? Many researchers are calling for research which illuminates how protective factors operate, rather than simply identifying risk and protective factors. Researchers have specifically cited the need for focused study of the processes or pathways through which relationships with adults offer significant psychological protection in the face of adversity (Masten, 1994; Resnick, Harris & Blum, 1993; Rutter, 1990). However, challenges posed by the empirical study of protective and supportive processes have been identified, including the limitations of the theoretical frameworks² currently being utilized to guide this research (Gottlieb & Sylvestre, 1996;

Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1978, 1979; Sullivan, 1997).

Several developmental-clinical models have pointed to the primacy of connection in people's lives (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan et al., 1991; Gilligan, 1982). These models have suggested that people grow through and toward relationships rather than toward autonomy and separation; furthermore, they have critiqued the prevailing models of separation which posit that healthy development proceeds in a series of stages toward independence and autonomy (Green, 1990). The Relational-Cultural Model (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Jordan, 1997) is beginning to spawn a significant body of empirical research looking at the importance of growth-fostering connections and mutuality in the development of psychological health (Genero, Miller, Surrey, & Baldwin, 1992; Genero, 1995; Liang et al., 1999; Hartling & Ly, 2000), to support the clinical data that has long provided evidence for the value of growth-fostering connection and the experience of mutuality for both men and women. For example, a study of adolescents demonstrated that the higher the perceived mutuality between adolescents and their mothers, the lower the levels of depression in the adolescents (Powell, Denton, & Mattsson, 1995).

In this paper, we explore the potential for the Relational-Cultural Model to contribute to the explication of the important and well-established link between strong relationships with adults and better psychological health in young people. Although relational-cultural theorists have studied relational processes primarily among adults, they have also written about these processes between children and adults as well (Dooley & Fedele, 1999; Mirkin, 1992; Rosen, 1992; Surrey, 1993).

There is an increasing interest in the use of relational perspectives as guiding frameworks for future research on protective or growth-promoting relationships between children and adults (Nestmann & Hurrelmann, 1994; Youniss, 1994). While much psychological theory and research have continued to focus heavily on individual or within-person factors, a recognition of the environmental, contextual, and relational influences on psychological development has been growing. Relational-Cultural Theory asserts that psychological health and vitality are linked with participation in growth-fostering relationships. These relationships, which are thought to form the foundation of psychological development, foster the growth of both participants. Mutuality and empathy are the key features of these relationships, as *both* participants must be (1) actively participating in the construction of the relationship and (2) be open and

responsive to the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of each another (Jordan, 1986; Surrey, 1985; Miller, 1988; Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Mutual empathy, at the core of this model, is based on respectful understanding and responsive listening and interacting (Jordan, 1999). People gain a sense of relational competence, or learn that they are effective in building relationships, through participation in mutually empathic interactions. They learn that they matter to each other and experience their feelings and actions as "making a difference," or as directly impacting their relationships (Jordan, 1999).

However, mutuality or mutual empathy between a parent and a child, or between an adult and a young person, does not mean there is total equality or sameness of role. In relationships between adults and young people, the older person is usually in a position of power and responsibility. The adult's role often involves some sense of taking care of the younger person or the relationship; the younger person is not there to take care of or serve the needs of the older person. Using anticipatory empathy and a sense of role responsibility, the adult will be respectful of the younger person's needs and the goal of their interaction will be to empower the younger person.

The emphasis on the centrality of relationships in psychological growth and change importantly directs our attention away from focusing only on the growth of one individual, suggesting instead that all growth is mutual and that the sociocultural contexts in which change and development occur are of utmost importance (Jordan, 1999; Walker & Miller, 2001).

In order to begin an exploration of factors that contribute to growth-fostering relationships between adults and children, we conducted several focus groups with children and adolescents exploring their relationships with adults. These groups were originally conducted for the purpose of bringing the voices and experiences of young people into discussions about a new and developing project at the Stone Center, the *Empowering Children for Life Initiatives*. The young people who participated in these focus groups responded to questions about their relationships with the adults they encountered in their day-to-day lives, such as their parents or other primary caregivers and other adults in their homes and communities.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through ongoing community youth groups and two school-based