
Relationships matter

How relational-based supports
can make a positive difference
in Alberta schools



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- United Way of Calgary and Area
- United Way of the Alberta Capital Region

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Introduction

Grounded in current and emerging research and best practice, including learnings from the 2009-17 Wellness, Resiliency and Partnerships (WRaP) Success Coach pilot project, this resource provides practical information and ideas for:

- understanding the importance of, and identifying strategies for, strengthening student-adult relationships across the school environment;
- guiding discussion, reflecting on practice and building a shared language around the concept of relational-based supports in schools and its potential for enhancing mental health and well-being, as well as improving student engagement and school success; and
- building shared understandings of the benefits and components of relational-based supports within a comprehensive continuum of supports and services.

Alberta's Ministry of Community and Social Services supports a province-wide network of FASD services and supports. More information, including a map and contact information for the FASD Service Network in your area, can be found on [FASD Alberta Networks](#).

In 2021, Alberta's government is re-introducing an enhanced WRaP program to help students with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) across the province reach their full potential. This new program will work closely with experts in the FASD Networks to leverage the success of existing FASD initiatives and activities, partnering with school authorities to build and enhance capacity with Alberta's educators. The specialized FASD supports embedded into the school's continuum of supports and services ensure students with FASD are able to get the most out of their school community through engagement, academic success and enhanced social, emotional and physical well-being. A key component of this continuum are relational-based supports outlined in this resource.

Background

The WRaP Success Coach project was developed in 2009 as part of the FASD 10-year Strategic Plan. This comprehensive and coordinated response to FASD focused on five areas, including: awareness, prevention, assessment and diagnosis, supports for individuals and caregivers and creating a FASD learning organization.

Administered through Alberta Education, and cost shared with partnering school authorities, the WRaP Coach project focused on providing innovative and flexible relational-based supports to support inclusion and increase student success through a youth-development coaching model. The WRaP Success Coach project also involved various community partners, such as the Alberta FASD Service Networks, to provide local context and expertise. School-based youth coaches (called WRaP or Success Coaches) worked with students affected by FASD to:

- maximize school engagement;
- increase academic success; and
- enhance social, emotional and physical well-being.

In addition, coaches worked to enhance school and family capacity for supporting students affected by FASD and to build partnerships that increased youth's access to supports at home, at school and in their communities. This included strengthening connections to local FASD Service Networks and their staff.

Who is this resource for?

The primary audience for this resource is:

- school and school authority leaders;
- teachers and other adults working to support students; and
- community partners working in collaboration with school authorities.

Relational-based Supports

The learnings from the WRaP Success Coach project align with and support current and emerging research on student engagement, high school completion and school improvement. This emerging research clearly identifies that healthy relationships matter—between students, between students and adults in the school environment, between adults in the building and between schools, families and community partners. For students in particular, healthy relationships are the foundation for all positive social interactions; they help students feel connected to others and to the school community. Experiencing healthy relationships also contributes to students' sense of belonging, engagement with learning and academic success.

In addition, healthy relationships are reciprocal. They benefit not only students, but also the adults who participate in them. Growing evidence suggests that strategically and systematically investing in healthy relationships in schools, and providing targeted and/or intensive and individualized relational-based supports for those students who require them, including students with diverse learning needs, will lead to improved learning and life outcomes. Across the province, schools and school authorities have seen the value of implementing relational-based supports to support student success. *Relationships Matter: How relational-based supports can make a positive difference in Alberta schools* is designed to strengthen and build on the work already underway provincially and to provide guidance and direction for those schools and school authorities looking to strengthen healthy relationships in their schools.

Relational-based supports help students develop resiliency and build a personal network of strong and flexible relationships they can rely on at home, at school and in the community. They are also structures and processes that are put in place to support students and adults in engaging intentionally in meaningful activities, collaborative reflection and critical conversations intended to enhance students' learning and social-emotional development.

A note about terminology in this resource:

Student is inclusive of children and youth.

School is inclusive of all in-person and virtual learning environments, including early learning.

Relationships Matter

A growing body of school-based research, some of which is cited within the pages of this resource, suggests that healthy relationships provide significant benefits to students, school culture and the community-at-large. Classrooms today represent a microcosm of our rich and diverse society. Alberta schools are dynamic environments that emphasize high standards, respect and safety, but we cannot take this for granted. A continuing focus on healthy relationships will help build healthy school environments where students are ready to learn and teachers are able to teach.

The education system has a role to play in students' personal development, as well as in their ability to contribute to the social and economic potential of the province. The ability to build, maintain and participate in healthy relationships is a cornerstone of effective and responsible citizenship and of inclusive and welcoming communities.

Well-designed relational-based supports:

- anticipate, value and respond to learner diversity in personalized and respectful ways;
- reduce the social barriers to learning and engagement that some students experience;
- create additional contexts for supporting individual student's growth and success—socially, emotionally and academically;
- reduce social isolation;
- reduce the incidence of challenging behaviour; and
- increase students' personal and social competence.

Goal of this Resource

The overall goal of this resource is to enhance capacity within schools, school authorities and community partners to strengthen student-adult relationships and improve outcomes, not only for students but also for the whole school community.

Included in this resource are descriptive examples of universal, targeted and individualized relational-based supports illustrating a range of possible supports available, and informing and inspiring local planning and decision-making.

In addition, four appendices offer practical information for strengthening healthy student-adult relationships and developing school-based relational supports, including:

- Appendix A: a series of additional "Pause & Reflect" questions that school staff can use as a starting point for professional conversations with colleagues and community partners;
- Appendix B: practical strategies and ideas that adults in the school community can use to strengthen their relationships with students;
- Appendix C: practical information for use by school-based, youth-development coaches in supporting all students, including those affected by FASD; and
- Appendix D: web-based resources used to inform the content of this resource.

In collaboration with the Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia (ARPDC), Alberta Education has developed two resources that speak to the value of relational-based supports for all students, including:

- [*Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools*](#); and
- [*Support High School Completion: A Tool Kit for Success*](#).

Legislation and Policy

Alberta Education recognizes the role healthy relationships play in student success as part of a comprehensive continuum of supports and services. The value of healthy relationships is explicit in Alberta Education’s legislation, policy and priorities.

Education Act

The [Education Act](#) requires school boards to:

- ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board and each staff member employed by the board is provided with a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging [Section 33(1)(d)]; and
- provide a continuum of supports and services to students that is consistent with the principles of inclusive education [Section 33(1)(e)].

Professional Practice Standards

The [professional practice standards](#) describe the competencies expected of teachers, leaders and superintendents. Fostering and building effective relationships is the first competency addressed in Alberta’s professional practice standards for teachers, school leaders and school superintendents. The expectation is that these relationships are inclusive of school and community contexts and underscore the value placed on the role healthy relationships play in student success.

Indicators of this competency include:

- acting consistently with fairness, respect and integrity;
- demonstrating empathy and a genuine caring for others;
- providing culturally appropriate and meaningful opportunities for students and for families and caregivers, as partners in education, to support student learning; and
- going beyond pedagogy and design to accepting each student for who they are and whatever they might bring.

Great teachers focus not on compliance, but on connections and relationships.

P.J. Caposey, educator and author

Competency Four of the professional practice standards addresses the expectation that teachers, school leaders and superintendents establish inclusive learning environments where diversity is embraced and where students, staff and the local community are welcomed, cared for, respected and safe. In an inclusive learning environment, healthy relationships are central to fostering a culture of equality and respect.

Ministerial Order on Student Learning

The [Ministerial Order on Student Learning](#) outlines the vision for student learning, including that students will gain the knowledge and skills to form the foundations for successful and fulfilling lives, and make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world.

Principles of Inclusive Education

Six inter-related principles are the foundation to inclusive education in Alberta. These principles can guide and inform value-based and learner-centered decisions related to policies, practices and actions, supporting an inclusive education system.

Anticipate, value and support diversity and learner differences.

Welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments create a sense of belonging for all learners, their families and communities.



Set high expectations for all learners.

Creating a culture of high expectations begins with the programs of study and meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Educators, families and caregivers presume competence of the learner and act on the belief that, with the appropriate instructional supports, every learner can be successful.



Understand learners' strengths and needs.

Robust and meaningful data is gathered and shared at all levels of the system—by teachers, families, schools, school authorities and the ministry—to understand and respond to the strengths and needs of learners.



Remove barriers within learning environments.

Educators work together to remove barriers within the learning environment so that all learners are successful and can participate in the school community.



Build capacity.

Government, school and system leaders, teachers, education professionals, families and community partners develop, strengthen and renew their understanding, skills and abilities to create and support flexible and responsive learning environments. Capacity building takes place at the individual, school, system and provincial levels.



Collaborate for success.

All education partners, including learners, school and system staff, parents, community members, post-secondary institutions, teacher preparation programs and government are committed to collaboration to support the success of all learners.





Pause and Reflect 1: How Do We Begin?

Consider taking a few moments to reflect and dialogue with colleagues and community partners about relational-based supports in your context.

- Does your school or school authority have a common understanding of and shared language around what healthy student-adult relationships include?
- How is your school or school authority currently encouraging and supporting the development of healthy student-adult relationships?
- What barriers to developing healthy relationships between students and adults currently exist in your school or school authority? How can these barriers be reduced or eliminated?

For additional reflection questions, see [Appendix A: Sample Reflection Questions, Beginning the Conversation](#).

Alberta's professional practice standards define inclusive learning environments as, "classrooms, schools, online learning environments or other educational settings structured to anticipate, value and respond to the diverse strengths and needs of all learners."

Insights on Relational-based Supports

Relational-based supports, implemented in robust and flexible ways, are highly effective for strengthening the social-emotional well-being of students, as well as enhancing learning and engagement.

Relational-based supports are developmental in nature. The Search Institute describes relationships as developmental when they help young people:

- discover who they are;
- develop abilities to shape their own lives; and
- learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them.¹

Key Components

Effective relational-based supports:

- anticipate, value and support diversity;
- focus on helping students build personal resiliency (i.e., the capacity to cope successfully with stress-related situations, overcome adversity and adapt positively to change);
- are built on and align with strategies, practices and approaches that are evidence-informed (i.e., effectiveness is documented and based on credible research and/or best practice);
- are aligned with specific needs and priorities of the school community;
- are planned and intentional processes and activities implemented as a school-wide approach;
- happen over a sustained period of time with regular and intentional interactions;
- have established goals with clearly understood outcomes and indicators and use ongoing data collection and analysis to inform planning, monitoring, evaluating and documenting effectiveness;
- are student-focused, flexible, personalized and incorporate student voice and choice;
- are strength-based, hope-focused and culturally responsive;
- build student capacity and autonomy, and promote social-emotional learning;
- engage students in active learning, problem solving and critical thinking;
- are supported by ongoing quality professional learning to strengthen capacity of school staff and community partners;
- engage and support family and school partnerships; and
- help students develop natural support networks (i.e., an evolving set of strong, flexible and healthy relationships at home, at school and in the community upon which they can rely).



Working with vulnerable youth to enhance their natural supports speaks to the connection between positive natural supports and healthy youth development. Learn more at [Working with Vulnerable Youth to Enhance their Natural Supports](#).

Burns Memorial Fund

¹Roehlkepartain, E. C., Pekel, K., Syvertsen, A. K., Sethi, J., Sullivan, T. K., & Scales, P. C. (2017). *Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

Relational-based supports offer schools a way to strengthen connections between students and adults and create more supportive and inclusive learning environments. By intentionally supporting students' social-emotional learning through stronger and more meaningful relationships with adults, schools can see students' enhanced ability to:

- participate in healthy relationships;
- work in co-operative groups;
- collaborate on projects; and
- be more engaged and self-directed learners.

Often, the result of this intentional focus is decreased disruptive behaviour, discipline referrals, social isolation and suspension rates.

Youth with strong webs become more resilient to social challenges and thrive in overcoming adversity and helping others

Derek Peterson, Child/Youth Advocate & Author



Pause and Reflect 2: Key Components of Relational-based Supports

Consider taking a few moments to reflect and dialogue with colleagues and community partners about the essential components of relational-based supports.

- Which of the essential components or relational-based supports are most evident in the current supports available in your school or school authority?
- Which of the essential relational-based supports components would you most like to see your school or school authority focus on? Why?

For additional sample reflection questions, see [Appendix A: Sample Reflection Questions, Essential Components of Relational-based Supports](#).

Children need nurturing, supportive and encouraging adults for sturdy brain development.

Applemag.ca (2016), Alberta Health Services

How Healthy Relationships Promote Healthy Brain Development

Neuroscience tells us that, as human beings, we are hard-wired to be in relationships.² An 'environment of relationships' is crucial for the development of a student's brain architecture, which lays the foundation for future outcomes, such as school performance, learner engagement, mental health and interpersonal skills. Strong and supportive relationships provide the responsiveness, scaffolding and protection that buffer students from developmental disruption. They also build key capacities—such as the ability to plan, monitor and regulate behaviour—that enable students to respond adaptively to adversity and thrive. This combination of supportive relationships, adaptive skill-building and positive experiences is the foundation of resiliency.³

² Lieberman, Mathew D. (2013). *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*. Oxford, Great Britain: Oxford Community Press.

³ Varga, S. and Zaff, F. (2017). *Defining Webs of Support: A New Framework to Advance Understanding of Relationships and Youth Development*. Center for Promise.

How Brains are Built provides information on how the architecture of the brain is foundational for learning and mental health. Learn more at [How Brains Are Built: Introducing the Brain Story](#).

Alberta Family Wellness Initiative

Early experiences are built into our brains and our bodies and positively or negatively affect lifelong learning, behaviour and health outcomes. Brain research shows that experiencing nurturing, responsive and stable relationships is essential for healthy brain development. By providing these supportive relationships, family members, caregivers, school staff and other significant adults in students' lives play an important role in building a strong foundation for learning, memory, behaviour, health and the ability to form healthy relationships. As brain development continues into a person's mid-20s, it is important to continue to make this strong connection to relationships and positive experiences, for the greatest levels of success.

Experiencing interactions that are repeatedly negative or unresponsive can negatively impact a student's learning, behaviour, mental health and well-being. When students experience frequent or prolonged adversity, (e.g., physical, sexual or emotional abuse; chronic neglect or abandonment; exposure to violence, including bullying; or substance abuse of a family member) the stress experience can become intolerable and toxic. Toxic stress derails healthy development and can result in trauma. This is especially true when a student has no caring adult to act as a buffer.

The effect of these adverse experiences on a child's developing brain increases the risk of long-term mental and physical health problems. To minimize these long-term health issues and protect students from the effects of toxic stress, the number of protective factors in a student's life must be increased and risk factors must be decreased.

Risk Factors

Risk factors are attributes, characteristics or experiences that increase the likelihood of illness or injury. Risk factors for students' mental health may include:

- events that challenge their social-emotional well-being, such as unsupportive or negative interactions;
- isolation;
- bullying;
- loss and grief;
- family member with an addiction and/or mental illness; and
- maltreatment, including exposure to abuse, poverty or abandonment.

For more information on how trauma-informed practice can increase protective factors and strengthen relationships in schools, see the Alberta Education video on [Trauma-informed Practice](#).

Protective Factors

Protective factors are conditions or attributes that promote well-being and reduce risk for negative outcomes, or insulate individuals from harm. These factors contribute to students' positive mental health and buffer the effect of risk or adverse factors. Protective factors are strengthened when students have opportunities to develop social-emotional skills and healthy relationships. Protective factors that promote students' mental health and well-being include:

- experiencing success in school or other learning environments;
- having support from a wide circle of family, friends, peers and school staff; and
- learning to understand, express and manage emotions and behaviour.

The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely they will be to recover from trauma and thrive.

Dr. Bruce Perry, author and psychiatrist

Key Understandings from Research

The following key understandings can be used by schools to inform planning and decision making related to programming and supports for students.

- Every student needs to have a healthy relationship with at least one adult in the school that is characterized by warmth, concern, openness and understanding, and who respects and appreciates who they are.
- If a student is well known by even one adult at school, that student's chances of success increases dramatically.⁴
- Students in high school consistently report that the relationships they developed with adults in their schools helped them thrive in secondary school.⁵
- Trust, respect and concern for others' welfare can have powerful effects on educators' and students' interpersonal relationships, as well as students' achievement and overall well-being.⁶
- Healthy relationships in school can buffer the impact of past adverse experiences (e.g., experiencing abuse, neglect, violence or a breakdown in parenting caused by separation or divorce, substance misuse, mental illness or incarceration).⁷ Meaningful relationships need to be culturally responsive and accommodate and honour diversity, particularly for Indigenous students.
- To ensure all students experience success, schools need to provide both high standards and robust support. This means having high expectations for all students (both socially and academically), and at the same time ensuring appropriate supports are in place so that all students, whatever their strengths or needs, can meet these expectations and experience success at school and beyond.
- Young people are highly motivated by relationships with parents, teachers and other adults when five actions occur within the relationship: expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power and expanding possibility.⁸
- Students who have stronger developmental relationships with adults, and specifically teachers, do significantly better on numerous measures of motivation and executive function that are essential for school success. These measures include self-regulation, mastery, motivation, academic confidence and openness to challenge.⁹

Positive connections are one of the five core strategies of Alberta's [High School Completion Strategic Framework](#).

An Alberta Education/ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) research project found that strong relationships with students, parents and local communities was one of the common factors in schools that are successfully supporting Indigenous students. The students in the study reported feeling supported when people at their schools care about them and care about who they are as Indigenous people.

Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students (OECD, 2017)



Pause & Reflect 3: Reflecting on the Research

Consider taking a few moments to reflect and dialogue with colleagues and community partners about current research on the importance of healthy relationships to student learning.

- How does your school or school authority use research to inform practice in general, and specifically regarding healthy relationships, brain development and neuroscience?
- What areas of relational-based supports research are most relevant for your school or school authority?

For additional reflection questions, see [Appendix A: Sample Reflection Questions, Reflecting on the Research](#).

⁴ Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible Learning*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

⁵ Willms, J. D., Friesen, S., & Milton, P. (2009). *What Did You Do In School Today? Transforming Classrooms Through Social, Academic and Intellectual Engagement*. Canadian Education Association. Toronto, ONT.

⁶ Chukwuemeka, O. (2013). Environmental influence on academic performance of secondary school students in port harcourt local government area of rivers state. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, 4 (12), 34-38.

⁷ Wolpov, R., Johnson, M. M., Hertel, R. & Kincaid, S. O. (2016). *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency and Academic Success*. Washington, DC: Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

⁸ Roehlkepartain, E.C., Pekek, K., Syvertsen, A.K., J., Sullivan, T.K., & Scales, P.C. (2017). *Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

⁹ *ibid.*

Community Partnerships and Relational-based Supports in Schools

When school staff collaborate in planning for relational-based supports, they build a shared understanding of both the social-emotional needs of students and the power of healthy relationships. This allows them to collaborate more effectively with families and community partners to identify supportive strategies and practices that can be implemented across environments, including at school or other learning environments and in the community.

To respond effectively to student and community needs, school staff need the additional expertise and/or active participation of specific community partners, such as post-secondary institutions, researchers, health professionals or other service providers. Partners from health and service agencies are often able to provide professional development to school staff on specific topics and/or issues. Collaborating with, and tapping into, the expertise of community partners and service providers is an effective way to build school staff capacity to better support students. Partners may also have relevant expertise and resources that can help in providing intensive individualized supports to students who require specific interventions or supports.

For more ideas on working with community partners, see [Working Together: Collaborative Practices and Partnership Toolkit](#). This resource offers a four-stage approach to help build capacity and develop partnerships to support children and youth in schools.

All things and all people, though we have our own individual gifts and special place, are dependent on and share in the growth and work of everything and everyone else. We believe that beings thrive when there is a web of interconnectedness between the individual and the community, and between the community and nature. Everything we do, every decision we make, affects our family, our community, it affects the air we breathe, the animals, the plants, the water in some way. Each of us is totally dependent on everything else.

Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer, University of Alberta professor, Faculty of Education, *Our Words, Our Ways*



Pause & Reflect 4: Collaborating with Community Partners

Consider taking a few moments to reflect and dialogue with colleagues on how collaborating with community partners can contribute to strengthening student-adult relationships in the school, as well as building capacity to implement school-based relational-based supports.

- How are community partners currently supporting students or working in collaboration with staff in your school or school authority?
- What new partnerships would benefit your students and build capacity of your school staff?

For additional reflection questions, see [Appendix A: Sample Questions, Collaboration and Community Partners](#).



Strengthening a Continuum of Supports and Services using Relational-based Supports

The defining characteristic of relational-based supports—and how they differ from more informal relationship-building strategies—is that they are part of a comprehensive continuum of supports and services, ranging in type and intensity, and designed to respond to the evolving and individual needs of students.

Note: It is the system structures for supports that are tiered, not the students.

A continuum that includes relational-based supports builds on the belief that, with the right strategies and supports, all students can be engaged, successful learners, and experience positive mental health and well-being. It is a flexible and responsive way of conceptualizing and organizing supports along multiple pathways.

Typically organized around three levels (similar to a pyramid of intervention or a multi-tiered system of support approach), a continuum of supports and services includes:

- universal supports for all students;
- targeted supports for some students who require additional support; and
- intensive individualized supports for a small number of students who require this level of support.



The three support levels are inter-related and cumulative, i.e., individuals receiving intensive individualized supports also require access to universal and targeted supports. Further, in a continuum model, a specific support might be considered either universal or targeted, depending on context and level of intensity required. For example, in one school an Elder-in-Residence might take a more universal approach and share cultural teachings with all students, whereas in another school the Elder-in-Residence may take a more targeted or individualized approach and focus on a small group or individual students who would most benefit from cultural and spiritual guidance.

Student needs can shift and change over time and context; therefore, supports must also be fluid and flexible. Ensuring appropriate universal strategies and supports are in place for all students can reduce the number of students requiring targeted supports. Ensuring targeted supports are in place on an as-needed basis can reduce the number of students requiring individualized types of supports, or may reduce the level of intensity required.

Reminder: The three support levels are inter-related and cumulative, i.e., individuals receiving intensive individualized supports also require access to universal and targeted supports.

When adults in the building know students well, and trust exists in their relationships, they are better able to observe when a student might need additional levels of support. When a healthy relationship exists, there is also an increased chance that a student will come to a trusted adult for help, if they need it.

Universal Supports for All Students

- **School-wide approaches to building welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments** (e.g., positive behaviors supports, restorative practices, trauma-informed practices, comprehensive school health approach, focus on social-emotional learning).
- **Healthy relationships, including mentoring** between students and other adults in the school, especially teachers.
- **Instructional strategies and learning experiences** that contribute to social-emotional learning and support healthy relationships (e.g., co-operative learning, project-based learning, collaborative problem-solving).
- **Creating a positive classroom community** that promotes respect, provides mutual support and honours diversity.
- **Classroom circles** create structured opportunities for students to get to know one another, share feelings and experiences and build communication skills. They can also be used to create opportunities for problem solving together about general classroom or school issues.
- **Co-curricular opportunities** to develop and support healthy relationships (e.g., reading buddies, cross-age groupings, service learning, community volunteering).
- **Elders and Knowledge Keepers** share their wisdom, cultural knowledge and experiences with students and school staff.
- **Leadership opportunities** for students.
- **Natural supports** are those supports that occur in everyday life and can include family members, friends, Elders, clergy or other spiritual leaders and coaches.
- **Transitional supports** are purposeful, coordinated and outcome-oriented approaches designed to help students successfully transition from grade-to-grade, school-to-school or school to post-secondary education or employment.

Targeted Supports for Some Students

- **Student advisory groups** provide targeted support when students meet individually or in small groups with a teacher advisor to explore relevant topics and/or issues, including building interpersonal skills, enhancing work habits, problem solving and setting goals for the future.
- **Teen mentors** meet regularly with younger students to build supportive relationships through literacy experiences and joint learning tasks, including career and post-secondary exploration.
- **Peer support networks** work together to promote welcoming school environments through social groups, such as student-led clubs or peer buddies (i.e., creating opportunities for friendships between students with and without disabilities).
- **Youth coaches** (sometimes called success or graduation coaches) meet individually or with small groups of students to engage in meaningful conversations and activities, provide support, problem solve and set goals to reduce barriers, improve academic success and help individual youth reach their potential.
- **Adult mentors** meet regularly with student mentees to build supportive relationships by working on academic and literacy-based tasks and exploring personal students' interests and strengths through games, crafts and other activities.



Individualized Support for a Few Students

- **Community conferences** use a restorative problem-solving approach to address wrongdoing and harm in a respectful and inclusive way. Through a facilitated face-to-face meeting, the individual(s) who have created harm have the opportunity to be directly accountable to those harmed, while the person(s) harmed has the opportunity to share their perspectives and have input into how the harm can be repaired.
- **Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC)**, whether low or high tech, ensures all students can communicate their thoughts, needs and desires. In providing the opportunity for diverse and innovative means of communication, positive relationships are supported.¹⁰
- **Youth coaches** use disability-sensitive strategies to support individual students. For example, the WRaP Success Coach model was specifically designed to support junior and senior high school students with FASD by offering individualized opportunities and supports to reduce barriers to student participation and learning and to increase school engagement and academic success.

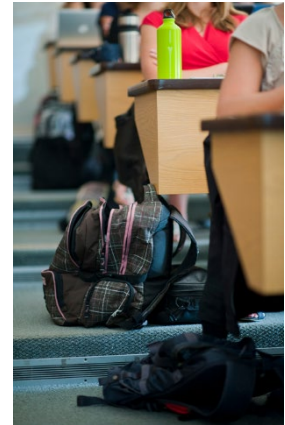


Pause & Reflect 5: Relational-based Supports within a Continuum of Supports and Services

Consider taking a few moments to reflect and dialogue with colleagues and community partners about planning and implementing relational-based supports within a continuum of supports and services.

- Describe the current range of student supports available in your school or school authority's continuum. How many of these could be considered relational-based supports?
- Are there gaps in the supports and services available to students? If so, how could these be addressed?

For additional reflection questions, see page 31 of [Appendix A: Sample Reflection Questions, Planning Relational-based Supports within a Continuum of Supports and Services](#).



Relational-based Supports in Practice

Universal, targeted and individualized supports can look different at different schools, reflective of the student needs and the resources and priorities of the school community.

The following composite stories are designed to help clarify what universal, targeted and individualized supports might look like. These stories present illustrative examples and are not factual case studies. They are a composite of documented best practices and anecdotes shared by educators from across the province and do not represent an exhaustive list of possibilities.

Universal relational-based supports

Hello – we're glad you're here!

The annual school survey in an urban high school indicated over 60 per cent of the students did not feel there was an adult in the high school with whom they could easily talk. At the beginning of the school year, the new principal worked with a core team of staff members to develop a number of strategies to address this issue. The team decided to begin by making sure that each student was greeted by at least one adult at the beginning and end of the school day. The goal was that every student would begin and end the day with a positive student-adult social interaction.

¹⁰ Literacy for All. (2016). Alberta Regional Consortium. <http://literacyforallinstruction.ca/access-to-communication/>.

The principal and administrative team took on the task of greeting students in the morning and at the end of the day. They set a goal of knowing every student's name by the end of the first week of school.

A map of key entrances and exits to the school was created, and school staff committed to being in a designated area of the school 20 minutes before the first bell and returning to the same area for 10 minutes at the end of the day on a rotating schedule. Teachers also committed to incorporating more explicit greetings into their individual classroom routines, and to greeting students as part of their supervision duties of the cafeteria, learning commons and hallways.

The mid-year survey revealed a significant increase in the percentage of students who reported that they could identify an adult in the school with whom they could talk. Teachers also reported improved rapport with individual students and increased confidence that they knew their students.

Welcoming new students

A Grades 7 to 12 school located in a highly transient, urban neighbourhood, where there often is a 70 per cent student turnover in classrooms between September and June, worked to create a more welcoming environment for new students by focusing on relationship building and promoting a sense of belonging. A core group of students worked with two teacher advisors to develop a number of strategies to welcome and support new students, including offering student-led tours, assigning a welcoming buddy for the first month, introducing new peers to other students and having regular check-ins with a teacher advisor.

The core group worked with the teacher advisors to develop a short survey that could be used to measure the success of the various strategies they implemented, and the extent to which new students felt welcomed and more connected as a result. Each new student took the survey at the end of their first month at the school. Survey results indicated that these students generally felt more connected because of the strategies put in place.

The core group then decided to follow up with each new student after six months to see if they still felt welcome and connected. They found that the majority did. The students indicated that they appreciated the regular check-ins with their teacher advisors and that opportunities to meet peers during their first month in school meant that new relationships had formed and been maintained. Some students suggested new strategies for the core group to consider, including paying attention to students who are moving from the middle school program to the high school program, so that they feel supported through the transition. Others offered to be a welcoming buddy to new students, so they could pay forward their own experience of being welcomed.

Mapping relationships in a classroom

A group of teachers at a large elementary school were concerned that not all students were feeling welcomed, connected and supported in partner and small group activities. To get a more accurate picture of social relationships in the classrooms, the teachers decided to use sociograms (i.e., visual representations of the relationships between individuals) to gather authentic data.

They asked each student to create a web, with their name in the centre, and then list three to five students in the classroom with whom they would like to work on a specific learning activity. The teachers asked the students to do this confidentially and not discuss their choices with other students. Likewise, teachers kept the sociogram data confidential.

The teachers then analyzed this data by:

- identifying isolated individuals who were not chosen by their peers;
- noting if a specific group of students were less likely to be connected to a wide range of individuals;
- noting if a specific group of students were strongly bonded and possibly excluding others; and
- noting unexpected pairings where one student indicated interest in working with another student and might benefit from some support to establish this new relationship.

The teachers completed sociograms with their students twice a year and reported that this data helped focus their awareness on individual students who may not feel connected and may need increased opportunities and/or support to become more engaged and confident members of the classroom community. Doing the sociograms twice a year also allowed teachers to see how student relationships in the classroom were evolving.

Beginning and wrapping up the week with classroom circles

Prompted by results from a school survey on school belonging, a Grade 5 teacher decided to begin each week with a 'check-in' circle to build positive classroom culture. Every Monday morning the teacher and students formed a circle and took turns speaking, using a "talking piece" (a rock in this case) to remind students to pay attention to the speaker and that only one person talks at a time. The teacher acted as a facilitator within the circle, setting the purpose and co-creating norms with the students. Everyone had the chance to listen and speak voluntarily (i.e., with the right to pass) responding to a low-risk question, such as:

- What is one thing you are looking forward to this week?
- What is one thing on your mind this week?
- What do you want to do more of this week?

The students wrapped up the week with a 'check-out circle' on Friday afternoon during which they explored questions, such as:

- Tell us two things you learned this week?
- What was one thing someone did this week that helped your learning?
- If you could have had one super power this week, what one would it have been?

Since initiating these classroom circles, the teacher has noted almost all students are participating in the circle activity. Passing the rock without talking was an option that about five students chose to exercise during the first month and, by the second month; almost all students chose to respond to all questions. The teacher also noted that while students initially demonstrated reluctance to participate by taking up to 10 minutes to get the circle formation organized, within six weeks students were quickly assembling their chairs without prompting. Halfway through the school year, students began contributing questions to be considered during circles and the teacher was impressed by the thoughtfulness and engagement these student-generated questions illustrated.

Putting the 'buddy' back in 'reading buddies'

As part of their literacy focus, a large urban Kindergarten to Grade 8 school had a designated Thursday-morning time set aside for reading buddies when older students met one-on-one with young students for a 30-minute shared-reading session.

Over the last two years, the older students participated in three hours of literacy training, where they learned strategies for helping their buddies decode and read for meaning. Teacher-collected data suggested that this intentional focus led to improved reading scores for the younger students. However, over the last year, teachers have observed growing indications that a number of students, particularly older students, did not seem to be enjoying the sessions. Teachers noted that there was often a lack of enthusiasm, shown by the older students, to get the sessions started on Thursday mornings (i.e., it was taking longer for the older buddies to join their younger buddies in the library). Furthermore, in last year's school survey, the overall response to the statement "I think reading buddies makes our school more welcoming, caring, respectful and safe" was decidedly neutral.

At the beginning of the year, within the theme of "Putting the Buddy Back in Reading Buddies," the older student buddies were asked to participate in an additional one-hour training session on relationship building. This session introduced them to a number of strategies for getting to know their younger buddies, providing feedback and encouragement and making the reading sessions fun and engaging. The older buddies used a set of simple interview questions to get to know their younger buddies, discover their interests and learn more about their attitudes toward reading and books. They also developed a set of conversation starters, compiled a list of riddles and jokes to share with their buddies and contributed to a library bulletin board featuring favourite read-aloud books. Throughout the year, teacher advisors checked in with the older buddies to see how they were using the relationship-building strategies, and offered them friendly reminders and feedback.

The next end-of-year school survey responses to the statement "I think reading buddies makes our school more welcoming, caring, respectful and safe" were overwhelmingly positive. In addition, teachers observed more enthusiasm from the older buddies, and were able to share many examples of how the younger and older buddies were developing and enjoying healthy relationships that extended beyond the 30-minute reading sessions.

Targeted relational-based supports

Teen mentors as brain builders

Thirty students from Grade 8 elected to participate in a 25-week teen mentoring project with a neighbouring elementary school. Each teen mentor was matched with a younger student to work on career exploration activities one hour per week in a supervised setting in the school.

To prepare for their mentoring experience, teens participated in the Alberta Mentoring Partnership online mentor orientation, focused on building relationships, creating safety, ensuring privacy and using engaging activities to explore career possibilities. They also worked through the Teen Mentoring handbook and activity guidebook to strengthen their understanding that the goal of mentoring is to help younger students develop healthy brains and how sustained, positive and enriching experiences with supportive adults (or older peers) contributes to children's overall physical and mental health.

Mentors and mentees spent the first five sessions getting to know each other through engaging activities and conversation. By the sixth session, they were ready to begin more focused career-exploration activities. Because they had taken the time to truly get to know each other, most of the pairs had an easy rapport and trusted one another and, because the mentors knew their mentees as individuals, most were able to personalize activities to better align with the strengths, interests and learning preferences of their individual mentees.

At the end of the school year, participant surveys confirmed that almost all mentees felt valued and understood by their teen mentor and almost all of the participants felt they had a clearer and more hopeful vision of the type of careers that interested them. In addition, every pair had completed and shared a final project that captured much of what they had learned about their own strengths, skills, interests and work preferences.

Elder-in-residence

A large urban high school identified the need to support the teaching and learning of Indigenous foundational knowledge for their students and staff. The administration invited an Elder to be a member of their staff and participate in their school community. The Elder delivers classroom instruction, teaches traditional protocols and promotes cross-cultural sharing. The Elder also offers support and guidance to all members of the school community. At a targeted-support level, the Elder brings in Elders from some Indigenous communities that the self-identified students are from, as a way to support their diverse backgrounds and to allow for the sharing of each Elder's distinct knowledge.

Through teaching Indigenous foundational knowledge, supporting students and communicating with families, the Elder builds relationships and reaches many of the students who need their mentorship. The students the Elder works with have the opportunity to present to classes and outside audiences on how the Elder's teachings have impacted them. In doing this, the students share and honour the value of the relationships formed through the Elder's role.

In reporting on the success of the Elder-in-residence at the end of the year, the school noted that student attendance had increased and that students demonstrated an increased responsibility to themselves and to others for their behaviour. Staff also reported that their understanding of Indigenous foundational knowledge had increased and that they were sharing this new knowledge with others outside of the school setting.

Individualized relational-based supports

Restoring relationships

Halfway through the school year, a Grade 8 teacher noticed some tension among a group of four girls who had been close friends since elementary school. The teacher tried to have an informal conversation with the girls, but they assured her nothing was wrong.

The next Monday morning, the principal called the teacher to the office to discuss an incident involving the girls that occurred over the weekend. A parent had forwarded some hurtful texts, which had escalated into online threats being made by three of the girls towards the fourth. The girl who had received the threats was now afraid to come to school and her parents were upset.

Neither the principal nor the teacher felt that suspending the girls involved would help resolve the situation, so they decided to hold a restorative community conference to facilitate a safe and honest conversation among all four girls and focus on how to repair the harm.

One of the criteria for holding a restorative community conference is that those who caused harm must be willing to take personal responsibility. The principal talked to the three girls involved and, although a bit reluctant at first, all were willing to admit their part in the texts and threats. The girl who was the target of the threats was also willing to participate as long as she could have her parents and her sister present as support. Parents of all the girls were contacted and all agreed to the process. One girl's mother was not able to attend but her aunt was there as a support.

A trained facilitator from the school division central office met briefly with each participant before the conference and then facilitated the one-hour session. Participants included the teacher, the school principal, the four girls and the girls' supporting family members. The facilitator made a point of thanking the aunt for being there to support her niece. This was the facilitator's way of acknowledging that participants have the right to choose whom they want as their support at a community conference and that her role as facilitator is to accept, and not judge, the participant's choice.

The conference took place in a circle. Each participant was asked a set of questions. This created an opportunity for all four girls to tell their story and explain how they had been affected.

The honest expressions of emotion during the conference impressed the teacher and the principal. All the participants heard what led up to the texts and threats, the hurt feelings that each of the girls had been carrying for a couple of years and the role that misunderstandings and twisting of facts had played in the incident. Through their participation in the community conference, the support people gained new understandings of what was happening in the girls' lives, and the teacher and principal were able to talk about how this behaviour impacted other students in the classroom.

By the end of the conference, each of the three girls made sincere apologies to the girl they had threatened. All four girls agreed to work together on a project to share with young students on how rumours and gossip can impact friendships. The girl who had received the threats was no longer afraid to come to school and, while she was not sure that her friendship with the other girls was completely repaired, she was comfortable being in class with them and hoped working on the joint project would help restore their trust in one another.

The conference ended with each of the participants offering their final thoughts. Everyone involved said they were satisfied with the outcome, and several participants commented that a suspension would not have resolved this issue as effectively as the conference did.

A youth success coach with disability-informed strategies

A youth success coach based in a large rural high school was to connect with and support 23 youth who had been identified by the school as needing individualized supports. Each of these students was considered at risk for early school leaving. Some students had a diagnosis of FASD and were not benefiting sufficiently from the current school-based universal and targeted supports that were in place.

With a background in child and youth care, the success coach was skilled at engaging young people through activities and conversations. Before the beginning of the school year, the success coach participated in a five-day orientation for people supporting individuals with FASD to build domain-specific expertise. Throughout the school year, the success coach continued to develop understandings of FASD-informed strategies through monthly professional learning sessions, as part of an online community of practice.

At the beginning of the school year, the success coach worked with each student and their family/guardian and teachers to identify areas of strength and need, and to develop goals and priorities. The coach continued to meet with families/guardians regularly throughout the year, often informally and off-site. In addition, the coach was a resource to school staff, providing practical FASD-informed information and strategies, and participating in collaborative problem solving and planning with the school staff to support the success of individual students.

During the first three months of the school year, much of the success coach's efforts were focused on helping families/guardians support students' regular school attendance. Strategies included regular check-ins with all of the students, early morning phone calls for a few students and riding the bus the first month of school with two students. The coach also served as a chaperone for school field trips, offered classroom support when students were working on collaborative projects and provided one-on-one coaching regarding the appropriate use of technology. The coach also supported students in attending community-based appointments related to mental health and well-being.

Coaching also focused on students' strengths. As their relationship progressed, the coach helped the students identify their personal interests and skills and, together, they explored opportunities to engage in activities at school and in the community that were focused on these interests and skills. Throughout the year, the success coach participated side-by-side with their students in a number of cultural and individual sports events in both the school and the community. The coach also supervised two extracurricular activities that a number of the students that they worked with participated in.

To further support four students who the coach decided were ready to participate in more community-based activities, they worked with the local Big Brothers, Big Sisters organization to match each student with a mentor trained in working with vulnerable children and youth. These community matches helped build another positive connection for each student, and the coach connected regularly with the mentors to find out how the students were doing and to share strategies that were working in order to provide the students with consistency between the school and the community-based outings.

Monitoring and evaluating results of the coaching efforts was a year-long process. At the beginning of the year, baseline data (e.g., attendance and suspension statistics) was established and an evaluation plan was developed that outlined evidence to be collected throughout the year, including pre- and post-surveys and interviews with students, families/guardians and school staff. The success coach used the data collected throughout the year to adjust programming in a responsive way. The goal was to ensure a focus on continuous improvement in teaching and learning that supported success for each student.



Pause & Reflect 6: Next Steps

Consider taking a few moments to reflect and dialogue with colleagues and community partners about planning next steps for strengthening relationships using relational-based supports within a continuum of supports and services in your school or school authority.

- What are the next steps in including relational-based supports in and across your continuum of supports and services in your school or school authority?
- What resources and expertise can you leverage in your school authority and community to make this happen?

For additional reflection questions, see [Appendix A: Sample Reflection Questions, Planning Next Steps](#).



Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Reflection Questions

1. Beginning the Conversation
2. Essential Components of Relational-based Supports
3. Reflecting on the Research
4. Collaboration and Community Partners
5. Inclusive Education and Healthy Relationships
6. Planning Relational-based Supports within a Continuum of Supports & Services
7. Planning Next Steps

Appendix B: Strategies for Strengthening Healthy Student-Adult Relationships

Appendix C: FASD-informed Strategies

Appendix D: List of Websites

Appendix E: References

Series of additional “Pause & Reflect” questions that school staff can use as a starting point for professional conversations with colleagues and community partners.



Appendix A: Sample Reflection Questions

Beginning the Conversation

Use one or more of the following questions to reflect on, and dialogue with colleagues and community partners about, how an intentional and systematic approach to strengthening relationships can contribute to student success in your school or school authority.

- What activities are your school or school authority already engaged in to support healthy relationships between students and adults?
- How does your school or school authority currently identify individual students who would benefit from additional adult relationships?
- Considering the unique needs and context of your school community, what might be the most relevant focus of relational-based supports for your students?
- What school-wide approaches are currently in place in your school or school authority that you could leverage to support a more intentional and systematic approach to providing relational-based supports for students?
- How is the ability to nurture healthy student-adult relationships factored into staff development, and into the recruitment and development of volunteers and community partners?
- What expertise and resources are available at the school and school authority level to support implementation of relational-based supports? What expertise and resources are available in the community?
- Who might be some of the potential community or research partners who could collaborate and support the implementation of relational-based supports in your school or school authority?

Essential Components of Relational-Based Supports

Use one or more of the following questions to reflect on and dialogue with colleagues on the essential components of relational-based supports.

- Is resiliency a topic of conversation and interest for your school(s)? Why or why not?
- What is your school or school authority currently doing that supports building the resiliency of students and staff? Is the connection between developmental relationships and learner success a topic of conversation and interest for your school(s)? Why or why not?
- Is evidence-informed practice a topic of conversation and interest for your schools? Why or why not?
- How is your school or school authority currently supporting evidence-informed practice?
- Which of the key components of relational-based supports resonates most strongly with you? Why?
- Which of the key relational-based supports components would be most challenging for your school or school authority to implement? Why?
- Which of the key relational-based supports components would you like to explore further with your colleagues? Why?

Reflecting on Research

Use one or more of the following questions to reflect on and dialogue with colleagues on how school staff can use this research to inform practice and strengthen adult relationships with students.

- Is current research about how healthy student-adult relationships affect student learning and life outcomes a topic of conversation and interest for your schools? Why or why not?
- What aspect of the current research presented in the document did you find the most compelling?
- Is the connection between brain development, learning and healthy relationships a topic of conversation and interest for your schools? Why or why not?
- What is your school or school authority currently doing to strengthen understandings of the link between brain development, learning and healthy relationships?
- How does this research presented in this document relate to other research that is currently informing decisions and practices in your school or school authority?
- What more would you like to learn from the relevant research? How can you effectively share research related to relational-based supports with staff and community partners?
- How can your school or your school authority use research related to relational-based supports to inform planning and decision-making?

Collaboration and Community Partners

Use one or more of the following questions to reflect on and dialogue with colleagues on how collaboration and community partners can contribute to strengthening healthy relationships and creating a continuum that includes relational-based supports in your school or school authority.

- Which community partners are currently working within your school or school authority? What role do they play?
- How does your community partners' engagement contribute to relational-based supports in your school or school authority?
- Does your school or school authority currently have the "right mix" of community partners involved? Who might your school or school authority be missing?
- Could your school or school authority address specific professional learning needs through collaboration with, and accessing the expertise of, community partners? If so, how would you go about doing this?
- What is the current process for ongoing communication between your school or school authority and your community partners? How could you enhance this process?
- How does your school or school authority currently monitor and evaluate community partner engagement and collaboration? How could you enhance this process? How could the data be shared and used more effectively?

Inclusive Education and Healthy Relationships

Use one or more of the following questions to reflect and dialogue with colleagues and community partners about how healthy relationships contribute to an inclusive education approach.

- To what extent does your school and school authority use relational-based supports to respond to diverse learning needs? What examples can you share?
- How could relational-based supports reduce barriers to learning for some students? Are there examples of this evident in your school or school authority? If so, what are some examples?

Planning Relational-based Supports within a Continuum of Supports and Services

Use one or more of the following questions to reflect on and dialogue with colleagues and community partners about how to plan for and implement a continuum of supports that can strengthen relationships and contribute to student success.

- Is the potential of a continuum of supports to improve learning and life outcomes for students a topic of conversation and interest for your schools? Why or why not? To what degree does a continuum of supports (that includes relational-based supports) currently exist in your school or school authority?
 - Are basic universal supports clearly articulated, supported and monitored to ensure they are making a positive difference for students?
 - Is there quick and easy access to an array of appropriate targeted supports?
 - Are intensive individualized supports readily available, adequately resourced and carefully monitored to ensure they are providing the specific supports individual students require to be successful?
- Considering the unique needs and context of your school community, what additional supports, interventions and services does your school or school authority require in order to better meet the needs of students?
- What actions might the school or school authority take to strengthen staff's capacity to provide a more intentional and systematic approach to providing relational-based supports?
- What expertise and resources are available at the school and school authority level to support implementation of relational-based supports? What expertise and resources are available in the community?
- How can community and research partners collaborate and support the implementation of relational-based supports in your school or school authority?

Planning Next Steps

Use one or more of the following questions to reflect on and dialogue with colleagues and community partners about steps for planning and implementing an intentional and systematic approach to strengthening students' relationships with adults and creating a continuum of supports and services that includes relational-based supports.

- What are the necessary steps to build your school or school authority staff understanding of the importance of relationships to learner success? What strategies will help this become a topic of conversation and interest for schools?
- How can staff meetings and professional development opportunities focus on practical and intentional ways to cultivate healthy student relationships with adults?
- What training and information on relationship building does your school or school authority need to make available to volunteers and other community partners?
- How can existing school-wide approaches be leveraged to support a more intentional and systematic approach to providing relational-based supports for students? What would be the first steps? What signs or evidence will the school collect to identify the potential need for more intentional and targeted relational-based supports?
- How will schools effectively and ethically collect and use data, feedback and other information to help monitor and strengthen intentional relationship building?
- How will schools collect evidence of positive change for students, and how will these success stories be shared and used to inform further planning and decision-making?

Appendix B: Strategies for Strengthening Healthy Student-Adult Relationships

The following collection of strategies is a resource from which to select, adapt and build on current practice. It is by no means an exhaustive collection; rather, it serves as a starting point to guide and/or enhance practice.

Be consistent. If a student has experienced many disappointments, consistency can be the most important quality you can offer.

Be present. Focus on individual students when they are talking about things that matter to them. Let them know you value their perspective and acknowledge when you've learned something from them.

Build your professional knowledge and practice. Participate in professional learning opportunities to explore how differentiated instruction, positive behaviour supports, trauma-informed practice, restorative practice and other approaches can facilitate and strengthen relationships with students.

Create authentic opportunities to strengthen peer relationships among students. Collaborate with staff to create regular and supported opportunities for students to learn with, and from, other students through extra- and co-curricular activities, such as service learning or cross-age groupings.

Dedicate time and resources to professional learning opportunities that will enhance the capacity of staff to build and maintain healthy relationships with students. Collaborate with a staff team to identify goals and develop plans for ongoing job embedded professional learning related to building and maintaining healthy relationships with students. Consider dedicating regular time at every staff meeting to share research, report on progress or explore a relational-based strategy.

Demonstrate a personal interest in students. Make time to talk to students individually about their strengths, talents, interests, goals, concerns and needs. Ask students how they learn best and help them explore what will help them be successful and connected learners and community members.

Don't expect perfection in yourself or in students. Human error is inevitable. What matters most is that students know you care. Do your best to handle mistakes in a responsible and constructive way. Don't get discouraged if it seems like the student is uninterested in you or the activities. Things can change from day-to-day and it is important to just keep responding to students with warmth and encouragement.

Don't generalize negative behaviour. Avoid phrases like "you always" or "you never."

Don't get discouraged. Your job is to accept students as they are, not to change them. Be careful not to set unrealistic expectations that cannot be met. Let students have much of the control over what the two of you talk about—and how you talk about it.

Expand possibilities. Find meaningful ways to bring community partners and other adults into the school to introduce students to other cultures, ideas and ways of learning and knowing. These opportunities will help students explore and build their understanding and commitment to community.

Positive relationships with adults are perhaps the single most important ingredient in promoting positive student development.

Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, Professors,
Researchers & Authors

No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.

Dr. James Comer, Yale Child Study Centre

Express concerns thoughtfully. If you feel you have to convey concern, do so in a way that also conveys reassurance and acceptance. Say why something is or is not appropriate and give an example of appropriate behaviour. Focus on helping students identify solutions for themselves. Use the coaching questions such as “How can you react differently?”; “What needs to be done?”; “Who can help you?”; or “Why is this important to you?”¹¹

Give frequent encouragement. Remind students of previous successes when something seems difficult. Tell them “you can do it.” Also, discuss that when learning new things, it usually is hard the first time you do anything but that makes it challenging and worthwhile to learn. Always be encouraging, even when talking about potentially challenging tasks or topics.

Greet students at the beginning and end of each day. Work with staff to establish regular routines to engage and acknowledge students at the beginning of the day (or class) and at the end of the day. Aim to ensure students have a positive encounter with adults as their first and last interaction of the school day.

Implement a school-wide approach to build and maintain a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment. Collaborate with staff to build professional knowledge and practice, and consider how differentiated instruction, positive behaviour supports, trauma-informed practice, restorative practice and other approaches can facilitate and strengthen relationships with students.

Keep your primary focus on the student and be respectful about the family. Do not press for details about students’ families or home life. Respect their privacy. Talk to the school administrator if you have any questions or concerns. You may learn things about students’ family beliefs or behaviours that are different from what you know or that you don’t agree with. It is important to remain non-judgmental and focus on building a healthy relationship with the child, no matter what you think their family circumstance is.¹²

Set clear expectations that all adults in the school will model the attributes of healthy relationships. Make reflecting on the attributes of healthy relationships part of professional learning, with the goal of creating a shared understanding and commitment to modeling these attributes. Encourage teachers to have similar expectation setting discussions with students. As an example, the Canadian Women’s Foundation offers a description of healthy relationships (side panel).

Set up regular opportunities for dialogue with students. Work with other school staff to establish formal (such as surveys and student councils) as well as informal channels (such as hallway chats and drop-ins) for students to give feedback, identify concerns and propose new solutions and ideas.

Take a proactive approach to getting to know every student in the school. Make time to talk to students individually about their strengths, talents, interests, goals, concerns and needs. Consider intentional strategies such as scheduling time to participate in classroom circles in every classroom over the first month of the school year and using this opportunity to not only introduce yourself to students, but also as a way of hearing from each student about what is important to them.

Healthy Relationships are:

Honest

- We share how we feel.
- We tell the truth.
- We take responsibility for our actions.

Safe

- We respect each other’s boundaries (physical, emotional and sexual).
- We control our anger.
- We never use intimidation, threats or violence.

Respectful

- We value each other’s feelings.
- We value each other’s opinions.
- We admit when we are wrong.

Fair

- We compromise.
- We share decision making.
- We each do our part.

Supportive

- We listen without judging.
- We believe in one another.
- We care if the other is happy.

Canadian Women’s Foundation

¹¹ *Teen Mentoring Toolkit*. Adapted with permission from Alberta Mentoring Partnership. Retrieved from <https://albertamentors.ca/peer-mentoring/teen-mentoring/>.

¹² *ibid*.

Talk with students. Here are some suggestions to get the conversation started:

*Nothing—nothing—
has more impact on
the life of a child than
positive relationships.*

Peter L. Benson,
Developmental Assets

- “What’s new in your world?”
- “How did you spend your day?”
- “What made you smile today?”
- “Tell me the top two things from your day, thus far.”
- “What are you looking forward to this week?”

Teach skills for co-operative and collaborative learning. Some students may find co-operative work challenging and will need specific instruction, guided practice and ongoing feedback and support to master such skills as active listening, giving positive feedback and negotiating differences.

Use active listening. Active listening not only confirms to students that they have been heard, but also acknowledges their feelings. For example, show your understanding by describing what you hear them saying and then identifying the related feeling they seem to be expressing.

Use an evidence-informed approach. Collaborate with staff to set tangible goals and develop outcome statements and indicator descriptions that will provide evidence of how enhancing relationships is making a positive difference in the school. Develop an assessment plan that includes collecting baseline data, strategies for monitoring and collecting data, and plans for analyzing and sharing results.

Use proximity. When you move around the classroom and teach from various areas and near different students, you build a sense of connection with students and communicate that you are interested and available.

Use reframing instead of criticism. Look for opportunities to show students a new picture of themselves. Instead of pointing out what is wrong, describe what is right and what still needs to be done.

Use students’ names positively. This simple gesture lets students know they matter and are valued as individuals. Also be aware of how you might be using individual students’ names in negative ways throughout the school day. When students receive constant verbal reminders (particularly if they are delivered in a frustrated or impatient tone of voice), these students may develop negative associations with adults using their name, and this can erode their sense of confidence and comfort level in the classroom.

*Young people thrive
when adults care about
them on a one-on-one
level, and when they
have a sense of
belonging to a caring
community.*

Bill Milliken, founder of
Communities in Schools

Practical information for use by school-based staff including youth-development coaches in supporting all students, including those affected by FASD.

Appendix C: FASD-informed Strategies

Individuals with FASD may have developmental disruptions related to cognition, learning and memory, attention, problem solving, language, and social-emotional understanding. These disruptions can result in academic challenges, disengagement in learning, substance abuse, relational and employment issues and involvement in the justice system.

Students affected by FASD share certain commonalities, including limited executive functioning, and understanding the typical hallmarks of this disability (e.g., short-term memory challenges, difficulty with reasoning and learning from mistakes) is essential to designing individualized strategies and interventions that will make a positive difference. FASD-informed strategies recognize that the challenges students face in school may go beyond academics, and that individualized supports and unique skillsets may be required to ensure the overall success of students affected by FASD.

Family engagement

Supportive, caring and respectful partnerships engage families and caregivers in their child's educational experience. Families and caregivers can make invaluable contributions to their child's success when their expertise and experience is valued and sought out. Families and caregiver involvement will vary, depending on personal circumstances, resources, and priorities. Many families will welcome opportunities to participate in identifying goals and priorities, creating service plans and evaluating success. Establishing healthy relationships with families and maintaining ongoing communication is an important aspect of coaching.

Strength-based approach

A strength-based approach is built on the belief that all students have strengths, capabilities and resources and the ability to recover from adversity. This approach focuses on opportunities, hope and solutions, rather than just problems or limitations. An important component of a strength-based approach is respectful and hope-focused language, including focusing on the individual rather than the disability.

Research supports the use of the FASD-informed strategies with all students, depending on the context, to support learner engagement and school success.

Culturally-respectful approach

Culture is central to learning and relationship building. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping how groups and individuals think and interact. Practices that acknowledge, respond to and celebrate diverse cultures will create more equitable and successful experiences for students from any culture. Students and families receiving coaching support need to feel safe and supported both as a person and in relation to their particular culture.

When students come from homes where the language and culture do not closely correspond to that of the school, it may be more difficult to develop a sense of belonging and this may hamper their ability to actively engage in learning and the school community.

People from different cultures learn and interact in different ways. Their expectations for learning and relationships may differ. To maximize effectiveness, coaches need to gain knowledge of the cultures of each of their students and adapt practices so that they reflect ways of communicating and learning that are familiar to the student, encourage multicultural perspectives and allow for inclusion of knowledge that is relevant to the student. Coaches recognize the importance of cultural connections and continually seek out authentic ways to incorporate and honour the culture of their students in day-to-day interactions and activities.

Goal setting

Setting meaningful goals with students and their families clarifies priorities, builds hope and motivation and creates opportunities for monitoring and celebrating successes, big and small. When goals based on larger aspirations (such as graduating from high school), are broken down into more manageable short-term goals and activities (such as attending class every day, participating in group tasks and completing assignments), success is likely.

Trauma-informed practice

Trauma-informed practice is about creating environments and forging relationships so a student feels safe and supported. This approach uses the lens of trauma to inform strategies, practices and activities in order to avoid inadvertently threatening the emotional safety of students who may have experienced trauma. This understanding reduces punitive types of responses that can re-traumatize students. Due to the complexities related to FASD, those students affected are more likely to have experienced trauma or adverse experiences so they are likely to benefit from trauma-informed strategies and practices.

Key components of this approach include a shared understanding of how trauma impacts learning and behaviour, clear behaviour expectations within structured and supportive environments and supported opportunities to develop healthy relationships and social-emotional competence.

Restorative practices

Restorative practices are a set of principles and strategies for building healthy relationships. These practices are also effective for responding more effectively to undesirable behaviour.

Key components of this approach include a strong focus on relationships, positive language and doing things with students, rather than to students. This approach recognizes that students need both high standards and high support. Restorative practice offers a continuum of strategies from informal (e.g., affective statements and questions) to more formal (e.g., classroom circles and community conferences).

Resiliency building

Resiliency is the capacity of individuals to cope successfully with stress-related situations, overcome adversity or adapt positively to change. Resilient individuals have protective factors that help them handle situations without being overwhelmed. Protective factors can be external, such as supportive relationships with family, peers or adults in the school and community.

Protective factors can also be internal factors or characteristics such as a positive sense of self, social competence or a commitment to learning. Coaching is an intentional approach to building students' personal resiliency through positive experiences and relationships, increased social supports and opportunities to develop social-emotional skills, such as the ability to regulate emotions and manage conflict and adversity.

Transition planning and support

Transitions can be challenging for many students, and this is especially so for students affected by FASD. Many students will benefit from support during transitions between classes (e.g., walking students to class and working with them to develop strategies for getting independently from class to class), or with transitions between weekends and weekdays (e.g., communicating with families and supporting their efforts to get the student to school). Most students will benefit from support transitioning between school programs (e.g., accompanying students on new school tours, meeting with new teachers and addressing logistical concerns).

Transition planning and support is critical in senior high school as students affected by FASD tend to need more supports during major life transition times. Transition planning needs to be collaborative and include students, their families or caregivers, community partners and school staff. Transition planning takes place over time and needs to consider post-secondary options, job placement or career possibilities, housing and social supports and available disability supports, such as Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) and Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) programming.

Teamwork and collaboration

Research shows that a collaborative team approach is the most effective model for supporting students affected by FASD. Teams can include family and caregivers, teachers and school staff, as well as community partners, service providers and experts in the field. Through their work, and by sharing their domain-specific knowledge, coaches help build the capacity of school staff and families to more effectively respond to, and support, students affected by FASD.

Using a collaborative approach, coaches help build a circle of support around each student, ensuring every student has a personal network of strong and flexible relationships that they can rely on in school, at home and in the community.

Appendix D: Web-based Resources

General

- Alberta Education: Professional Practice Standards: <https://www.alberta.ca/professional-practice-standards.aspx>
- Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia: <https://arpdc.ab.ca/>
- Positive Behaviour Supports in Alberta: <https://www.alberta.ca/positive-behaviour-supports.aspx>
- PolicyWise Supporting Every Student Learning Series: <https://policywise.com/resource/supporting-every-student-learning-series/>

Coaching

- Success coaches: All In For Youth United Way Calgary and Area: <http://www.calgaryunitedway.org/impact/kids/all-in-for-youth>
- Graduation Coach Initiative: Edmonton Catholic Schools: <https://www.ecsd.net/page/1341/graduation-coach-initiative>

Developmental Relationships

- Search Institute – Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive: <http://page.search-institute.org/relationships-first>
- Getting Relationships Right: <https://www.search-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Getting-Relationships-Right.pdf>

Natural Supports

- Connections First: <https://www.connectionsfirst.ca/>
- Integrative Youth Development™ Institute for Community & Adolescent Resiliency – Unifying Solutions: https://www.icarus.com/about/our_phramework.html

Mentoring

- Alberta Education: <https://www.alberta.ca/student-mentoring.aspx>
- Alberta Mentoring Partnership: <https://albertamentors.ca/>

School Connectedness

- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention: https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/school_connectedness.htm

Trauma-informed Practice

- Alberta Education: <https://www.alberta.ca/trauma-informed-practice.aspx>
- Trauma-Informed Schools <https://traumaawareschools.org/traumaInSchools>
- Resilient Educator: Trauma-Informed Practices in School <https://resilienteducator.com/collections/trauma-informed-school-practices/>

Brain Development Research

- Alberta Family Wellness Initiative – Building Better Brains: <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/>

Mental Health

- *Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools*: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/9781460132999>
- *Pathways to Hope: Best Practices in Suicide Prevention for Alberta schools*: <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/pathways-to-hope-best-practices-in-suicide-prevention-for-alberta-schools>
- *Creating a Compassionate Classroom* (ATA and Canadian Mental Health Association): <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/News%20Room/ata%20news/Volume%2050%202015-16/Number-15/Pages/Updated-mental-health.aspx>

Social-emotional Learning/Competencies

- Alberta Education: <https://www.alberta.ca/social-emotional-learning.aspx>
- Supporting Every Student Learning Series (PolicyWise): <https://policywise.com/initiatives/ses/social-emotional-learning/>

Elders in the classroom

- LearnAlberta: https://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/Elders/documents/elder_wisdom_in_classroom.pdf

Supporting Students with FASD

- Engaging All Learners: <http://www.engagingalllearners.ca/il/supporting-students-with-fasd/>
- LearnAlberta: <https://www.learnalberta.ca/content/inmdict/html/fasd.html>
- Alberta FASD Networks: <https://fasdalberta.ca/>
- Canadian FASD Research Network (CanFASD): <https://canfasd.ca/>

Appendix E: References

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