

# Engage with Intention

## HPR in Action!

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A 12-week campaign to help trusted adults build intentional, health-promoting relationships (HPR) with youth ages 11-18

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## Week 7

### Topic:

**Engage micro-skills.**

(HPR way of being strategy #3)

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## WEEK 7: Engage micro-skills.

- What are micro-skills within relationships, and how are they important to youth well-being?
- What are seven micro-skills used in health-promoting relationships as part of the HPR *way of being*?
- How can I intentionally engage the HPR micro-skills in everyday moments with youth?
- **TRUSTED ADULT ACTIVITY:** MICRO-SKILLS BRIEF SELF-ASSESSMENT
- **YOUTH ACTIVITY:** EVERYDAY WORDS & ACTIONS



### WHAT ARE MICRO-SKILLS WITHIN RELATIONSHIPS, AND HOW ARE THEY IMPORTANT TO YOUTH WELL-BEING?

Micro-skills are the specific, moment-to-moment words, actions, tones, facial expressions, body language, and ways of responding we use in our interactions with others. They are the small, everyday behaviors that shape the quality of relationships – for better or for worse. **Our choice of words and actions are never neutral.** The specific language we use, our tone of voice, the questions we ask (or don't ask), moments of full presence (or distraction), warm eye contact or closed posture, and how we respond to a youth's joy, struggle, or silence all shape the emotional climate and how a youth thinks and feels about themselves, their abilities, and the decisions they make.

Many of us overlook or underestimate the cumulative impact of our tone, body language, and seemingly small word choices in daily interactions. **Being intentional and thoughtful in these moments allows each interaction to reach its full potential and turn ordinary exchanges into opportunities to build trust, affirm worth, and strengthen protective beliefs.**<sup>1</sup>

Neuroscience and developmental research show that consistent, responsive micro-interactions help wire the brain for trust, emotional regulation, and resilience, while dismissive or distracted ones can have the opposite effect.<sup>2</sup> Strong evidence from relationship science, developmental psychology, and prevention research shows they are linked to better mental health, lower risk of substance use and other behavioral challenges, stronger academic engagement, and greater long-term flourishing. In contrast, low-quality micro-interactions (e.g., distracted listening, generic responses, or overly directive fixing) can weaken connection and protective factors.<sup>3</sup>

1. Holt-Lunstad J. Social connection as a critical factor for mental and physical health: evidence, trends, challenges, and future implications. *World Psychiatry*. 2024;23(3):312–332. doi:10.1002/wps.21224

2. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. *Serve and Return Interaction Shapes Brain Circuitry*. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University; 2023.

3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Connecting the Dots: Connecting multiple forms of violence*. Accessed June 13, 2026.

## WHAT ARE SEVEN MICRO-SKILLS USED IN THE HPR WAY OF BEING?

The HPR *way of being* includes seven core micro-skills that trusted adults can intentionally practice in everyday moments. These skills help create a positive environment and facilitate connection with youth to strengthen the five core protective beliefs.

1

**Be fully present and notice.**

Giving undivided attention and observing both verbal and nonverbal cues without distraction or agenda.

2

**Be meaningfully curious.**

Asking open-ended questions to understand the youth's perspective, feelings, goals, values, purpose, or ideas without judgment or leading.

3

**Affirm youth strengths, values, contributions, and how much they are needed.**

Specifically naming and describing the importance of positive qualities, efforts, impacts, or inherent worth in youth.

4

**Mirror and reflect back to youth.**

Paraphrasing or summarizing what you heard (content and emotion) to show understanding and help the youth feel truly seen.

5

**Activate agency.**

Helping youth recognize and activate their own power, choices, and capacity to influence situations and solve problems.

6

**Support youth in navigating challenges.**

Walking alongside during difficulties with co-regulation, perspective, or resources, without rescuing or minimizing.

7

**Advocate for youth.**

Standing up for or amplifying the youth's needs, voice, and best interests when appropriate.

# HOW CAN I INTENTIONALLY ENGAGE THE HPR MICRO-SKILLS IN EVERYDAY MOMENTS WITH YOUTH?

The first three micro-skills (Be fully present and notice. Be meaningfully curious. Affirm youth strengths, values, contributions, and how much they are needed.) are important foundational micro-skills. The true power emerges when we intentionally practice them and engage them together with the facilitators of connection. The most impactful responses weave these elements together in meaningful ways that address the specific context and the youth's needs and are guided by the HPR way of thinking:



## In this moment, what words and actions are most important?

- How can I engage the micro-skills to cultivate the protective beliefs **in this unique context** with a youth or group of youth?
- How can I **create a positive emotional environment** using my words and actions?
- How can I **facilitate meaningful connection** using my words and actions?
- (Next week we will explore how these micro-skills also support growing abilities in youth.)

## Practical Guidance for Intentional Use

- **Start small and build consistency.** Pick 1–2 micro-skills to focus on this week (see the Trusted Adult Activity). Even brief, purposeful use in ordinary moments (a car ride, touchpoint in the hallway, post-game debrief, homework check-in, or text reply) can make a big difference over time.
- **Stay authentic.** Adapt the skills to your own style and the unique relationship while remaining grounded in presence, respect, and genuine care.
- **Combine them naturally.** For example, full presence + curiosity + reflection + activating agency often work beautifully together in one short interaction.
- **Reflect regularly.** After a moment with a youth, quickly consider: Which micro-skills did I use? How did the youth respond? Which protective belief might this have strengthened? What felt natural or stretched me?

## Micro-Skills in Action

The following table offers practical examples of each micro-skill in everyday interactions to help bring the micro-skills to life. Use these examples to generate more ideas for your own unique application of the micro-skills with youth.

<b>Be fully present and notice.</b>	<p><b>Scenario:</b> A 13-year-old comes home from school unusually withdrawn.</p> <p><b>In Action:</b> The trusted adult puts down their phone, turns toward the youth with warm eye contact and open posture, and says, “I notice you seem quieter than usual today. I’m here if you want to talk—or we can just sit together for a bit.”</p>
<b>Be meaningfully curious.</b>	<p><b>Scenario:</b> The youth mentions a conflict with friends, a tough decision, or something they’re excited about.</p> <p><b>In Action:</b> The trusted adult listens first, then asks with genuine interest, “What matters most to you in this situation?” Invite the youth to explore their own thoughts, feelings, values, and goals.</p>
<b>Affirm youth strengths, values, contributions...</b>	<p><b>Scenario:</b> The youth helped a sibling, showed kindness to a friend, or persisted through a challenge.</p> <p><b>In Action:</b> The trusted adult says, “The kind of thoughtfulness you showed by stepping in to help your sister/team is exactly who you are, and it really matters to our family/team.”</p>
<b>Mirror and reflect back to youth.</b>	<p><b>Scenario:</b> The youth vents about a hard day or feeling overwhelmed.</p> <p><b>In Action:</b> The trusted adult listens, then reflects: “Today was really overwhelming with the test and the drama with your friends. You felt pulled in a lot of directions and that’s exhausting. Did I get that right?”</p>
<b>Activate agency.</b>	<p><b>Scenario:</b> The youth feels stuck on a problem, decision, or setback (e.g., school conflict or personal goal).</p> <p><b>In Action:</b> The trusted adult says, “You’ve got some real options here. Thinking about your values and what is important to you, what do you think might be a good next step for you?”</p>
<b>Support youth in navigating challenges.</b>	<p><b>Scenario:</b> The youth is anxious about a presentation/hard conversation.</p> <p><b>In Action:</b> The trusted adult says, “How are you feeling about this? I’m here with you. Want to practice together, take a few breaths, or talk through what’s worrying you most? I have confidence you can get through this.”</p>
<b>Advocate for youth.</b>	<p><b>Scenario:</b> The youth is struggling with a teacher, coach, or system and feels their voice isn’t being heard.</p> <p><b>In Action:</b> The trusted adult says, “Would it help if I went with you, or we practiced what you want to say? Your needs matter here.”</p>

# TRUSTED ADULT ACTIVITY:

## MICRO-SKILLS BRIEF SELF-ASSESSMENT

Estimated  
Time:  
10 mins

**Purpose:** To help you as trusted adults build self-awareness of current micro-skill habits and purposefully grow in them this week to strengthen your HPR *way of being*.

**Instructions:** Rate how often you demonstrate each micro-skill's set of activities in the context of your relationships with youth ages 11–18 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "Almost Never", 3 "Sometimes", and 5 "Almost Always". **Circle the micro-skills you score 3 or below in and commit to practicing those micro-skills more intentionally this week.**

		Rating (1-5)
<b>Be fully present and notice.</b>	1.I let go of competing priorities and am fully in the moment. 2.I relax the urge to teach, fix, or remind. 3.I notice the youth in a way that communicates back I care.	
<b>Be meaningfully curious.</b>	1.I draw out youths' perspectives, feelings, values and goals. 2.I put aside my schemas, assumptions, and past experiences to increase my readiness and ability to be curious. 3.I ask deep and purposeful open-ended questions.	
<b>Affirm youth strengths, values, contributions...</b>	1.I listen for strengths within youth that may be expressed as attitudes, knowledge, values, feelings, goals, and values. 2.I keep affirmations all about the youth vs. inserting myself. 3.I ground affirmations in what is authentic and true.	
<b>Mirror and reflect back to youth.</b>	1.I listen and observe deeply with full presence to understand the true essence of what youth are expressing and sharing. 2.I choose what to reflect with the purpose of youth feeling seen. 3.I convey acceptance and nonjudgment when reflecting back.	
<b>Activate agency.</b>	1.I empower youths' sense of their strengths and skills. 2.I ask youth for their thoughts, ideas, solutions, and next steps. 3.I create opportunities for youth to lead & exercise their freedom.	
<b>Support youth in navigating challenges.</b>	1.I increase youths' understanding of what the challenge is and how it is affecting them. 2.I partner with youth to support them to identify their own solutions. 3.I normalize having problems and navigating them is not easy.	
<b>Advocate for youth.</b>	1.I explore and honor youths' thoughts, ideas, and wishes for support and advocacy. 2.I invite youth to offer feedback after advocating on their behalf. 3.I connect youth with people, places, resources, and/or opportunities that will support their goals and ability to thrive.	

# YOUTH ACTIVITY:

## EVERYDAY WORDS & ACTIONS



Estimated Time: 30 mins

**Purpose of Activity:** To help you (youth) NOTICE what trusted adults do that makes you feel seen, supported, valued, loved, and capable and REFLECT on words and actions YOU would like to use in your own relationships.

### Instructions for Youth (NOTICING WORDS & ACTIONS):

- Think about 2–3 positive moments you have had with trusted adults over the past few weeks in which you felt seen, supported, valued, loved, and/or capable.
- Consider the following questions and write down your responses:
  - What **words** or **statements** did the trusted adult say that meant something to me? (Be specific.)
  - What **actions** (e.g. was fully present, made eye contact, gave a hug, etc.) did the trusted adult do (or avoid – e.g. not judging) that meant something to me?
  - What **feelings** or **thoughts** did those words and actions create in me?
  - Which **belief(s)** did those words and actions strengthen in me?
- Discuss your responses as a group (to the degree you feel comfortable sharing) with a trusted adult facilitator.

### Instructions for Youth (MY OWN WORDS & ACTIONS):

- Consider the following questions and write down your responses:
  - What is most important to me about the way I treat others? (Review your responses to the *Relationships Values* activity in Week 3 if completed.)
  - Which beliefs are important to me to build in my friends? Or how do I want my friends to feel about themselves?
  - What types of words or statements can I use over the next week that represent my values?
  - What actions (e.g., handshakes, smiling at others, paying attention to my friends when they're talking, waiting for others so they don't feel left out, etc.) can I engage in over the next week to live more of my values?
- Discuss your responses as a group (to the degree you feel comfortable sharing) with a trusted adult facilitator.

I am seen and loved.  
I matter.  
I can influence my life.  
I can overcome hard things.  
I have support.