

Engage with Intention



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

Week 9

Topic:

Building Health-Promoting Relationships
in the Context of Relational Challenges

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WEEK 9: Building HPR within Relational Challenges

- What considerations are important when building relationships with youth experiencing relational challenges such as previous trauma, mental health conditions, or justice involvement?
- How can trusted adults prepare themselves to build relationships with youth in these contexts?
- How can the HPR *way of being* be intentionally engaged to rebuild trust and strengthen relationships in these contexts
- **TRUSTED ADULT ACTIVITY:** GROWTH PLANNING FOR RELATIONAL CHALLENGES
- **YOUTH ACTIVITY:** EXPLORING TRUST AND THE SUPPORT I NEED



WHAT CONSIDERATIONS ARE IMPORTANT WHEN BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTH EXPERIENCING RELATIONAL CHALLENGES?

This week explores how to apply the HPR way of being when trust has been tested or when additional challenges such as relational trauma, mental health conditions, or justice involvement make relationships more difficult. Building health-promoting relationships with youth in these contexts requires intentional, trauma-informed, and evidence-based approaches. The literature consistently highlights several key **foundational practices** to consider.

1

Prioritize safety, consistency, and trustworthiness.

Youth with relational trauma often have heightened sensitivity to perceived threats or inconsistency. Consistent, predictable, patient, transparent, & non-punitive interactions help establish a sense of safety & trust – required for building protective beliefs.^{1,2}

2

Apply trauma-informed principles.

Safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (SAMHSA framework) improve engagement, reduce the risk of re-traumatization, and create conditions for long-term well-being and stronger protective beliefs.³

3

Emphasize repair, nonjudgment, accountability, and strengths-based interactions.

Quick, sincere repair of ruptures that includes trusted adults conveying nonjudgment and taking accountability, if applicable, models healthy relationships. Full presence and genuine affirmation of strengths (even small ones) help rebuild the protective beliefs “I matter” and “I can overcome hard things,” – both often weakened by previous relational distrust.⁴

4

Practice cultural humility and self-awareness.

Examine your own biases, assumptions, and power dynamics. Remain open to learning from the youth. Ask youth directly what support looks like for them. This approach strengthens trust, prevents unintended harm, and models respect.⁵

5

Focus on agency and protective belief cultivation

Help youth experience small successes, voice their needs, and regain a sense of control. This directly supports the protective beliefs “I can influence my life” and “I can overcome hard things,” which are often eroded by trauma, justice involvement, or mental health challenges.^{6,7}

Special Considerations

While foundational practices provide universal starting points, the following tailored considerations highlight common patterns and can further strengthen relationships with specific populations. While these considerations require us to be flexible and allow grace, it is important to hold to supportive accountability and to ensure that acceptance does not communicate agreement with any negative behaviors.

- **Relational Trauma:** Prioritize co-regulation (helping youth manage emotions in your presence), predictability in routines/responses, and gradual opportunities for safe vulnerability. Avoid power struggles or sudden changes to avoid fear. Focus on consistent, calm presence to rebuild safety and the belief “I have support.”^{1,2}
- **Justice Involvement:** Acknowledge potential mistrust of systems and adults in authority. Prioritize voice, choice, and future-oriented conversations that emphasize strengths and possibilities. Address stigma directly and focus on rebuilding agency and hope (“I can influence my life”).³
- **Depression and Anxiety:** Be patient with withdrawal, low energy, avoidance, or irritability. Use gentle, non-pressuring curiosity, convey acceptance and non-judgment and celebrate small efforts of participation. Help connect emotions to coping strategies that support self-efficacy and “I can overcome hard things.”⁴

Resources

Topic	Resource
Trauma-Informed Care	• Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) ◦ Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. https://www.samhsa.gov/resource/ebp/trauma-informed-care • National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) ◦ Creating Trauma-Informed Systems and youth-serving adult guides. https://www.nctsn.org/
Justice-Involved Youth	• Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) ◦ Positive Youth Development Literature Review and resources on relational approaches. https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/positive_youth_development.pdf ◦ Trauma-informed care in juvenile justice: https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/taxonomy/term/trauma-informed-care
Youth Mental Health	• American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP). ◦ Practice parameters and family resources for anxiety and depression. https://www.aacap.org/ • Search Institute. ◦ Developmental Relationships Framework. https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships-framework/
Positive Childhood Experiences	• Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative (CAHMI) ◦ Positive Childhood Experiences resources. https://www.cahmi.org/

HOW CAN TRUSTED ADULTS PREPARE THEMSELVES TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUTH IN THESE CONTEXTS?

Trusted adults play a powerful role in helping youth rebuild trust and protective beliefs after relational trauma or during difficult challenges such as mental health struggles or justice involvement. Showing up effectively requires intentional preparation. This preparation involves an ongoing process of self-work, learning, and building your own capacity to be a steady, safe presence. Small, consistent efforts in preparation can make a big difference in how well you connect with youth and support their well-being.

1. Cultivate Self-Awareness and Cultural Humility

Cultural humility means being willing to learn from the youth, checking your own biases or assumptions, and remembering that you are not the expert on their life experiences. It also means respecting their perspective and treating them as the expert on what they need. Be aware of how your own ego could affect your response to a given youth or situation. Regular self-reflection helps you avoid unintentional harm and build real trust.⁵

2. Build Knowledge of Trauma, Mental Health, and Justice Involvement

Learn the common impacts of relational trauma (e.g., hypervigilance, difficulty with trust), depression/anxiety (e.g., withdrawal, low motivation, irritability), and justice system experiences (e.g., stigma, mistrust of authority). Use credible resources while recognizing every youth's experience is unique. Knowledge increases empathy and reduces frustration.^{1,3}

3. Strengthen Your Own Emotional Regulation and Resilience

Practice your own coping strategies and seek support when needed to stay calm or manage stress (peer consultation, supervision, or personal care). A steady, regulated adult is better able to co-regulate with youth and maintain consistent presence.²

4. Adopt a Growth Mindset and Commitment to Repair

Accept that mistakes will happen. Be ready to apologize sincerely and learn from mistakes. View challenges as opportunities to model “I can overcome hard things.”

5. Seek Consultation and Collaboration

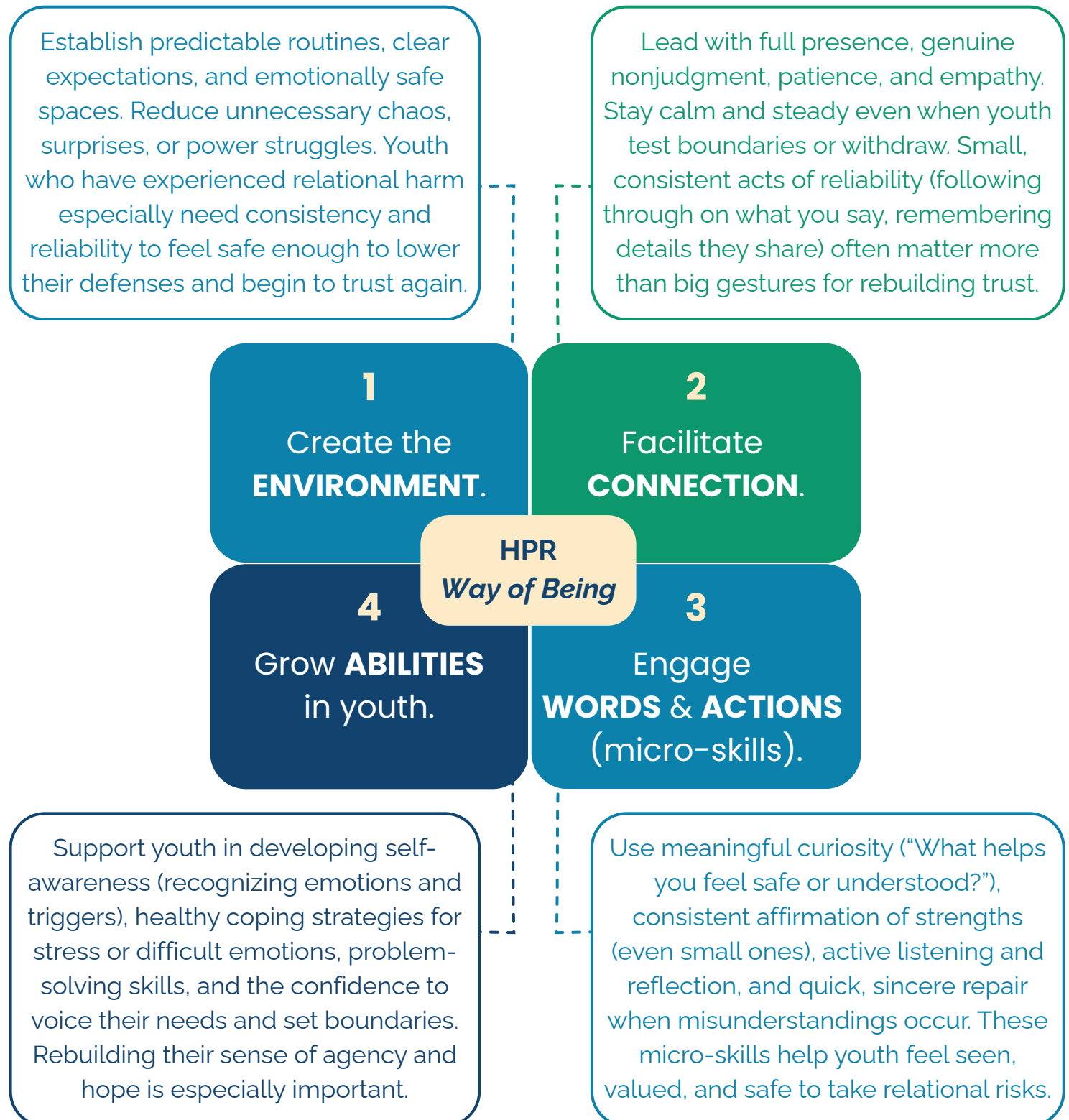
Connect with colleagues, mentors, or specialists experienced in trauma, justice, or mental health. Team approaches often provide better support for complex needs.

Practical First Steps

- Complete the TRUSTED ADULT ACTIVITY at the end of this section to reflect and identify areas for growth.
- Identify one resource or training to build areas of knowledge related to impacts of these experiences on youth and how to better prepare yourself to navigate them.
- Commit to taking steps to build one identified area of growth over the next month.

HOW CAN THE HPR WAY OF BEING BE ENGAGED TO SUPPORT TRUST AND RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

The HPR way of being provides a clear, practical framework for rebuilding trust and strengthening relationships with youth facing relational trauma, mental health challenges, or justice involvement. Here's how the four strategies can be intentionally applied:



TRUSTED ADULT ACTIVITY:

GROWTH PLANNING FOR RELATIONAL CHALLENGES

Estimated
Time:
15 mins

Purpose of Activity: To 1) reflect on your current ability to practice the HPR way of being with youth who may be emotionally dysregulated or have different capacities or preferences for connection, 2) identify personal challenges to using the HPR way of being in these contexts, and 3) develop a preliminary growth strategy to support future encounters with youth experiencing relational challenges.

REFLECT

- **What youth in my life are currently experiencing relational challenges, emotional dysregulation, or difficulty connecting with me or others?**
- **How am I currently showing up for them using the HPR way of being?** (1. Create the environment. 2. Facilitate connection. 3. Engage micro-skills. 4. Grow youth abilities.)
- **How am I currently reacting and responding to unexpected emotions or situations?** (e.g. angry outbursts, disrespect, silence, aggression)
- **How aligned is the way I show up and respond to unexpected situations with youth aligned with my values, the person I want to be, and what the science suggests is most helpful?**

RECOGNIZE

- **What emotions, words, or behaviors in youth (if any) may prevent me from engaging the HPR way of being with them?** (e.g., disrespectful words, yelling, personal attacks, lying, silence)
- **Why might those things bother me?** (e.g., Did I experience them from others in the past? Am I too tired or overstimulated to manage them in the way I want to? Are they activating beliefs I may hold about myself or how youth should treat adults and vice versa that might be creating discomfort or affecting my approach?)
- **What might I need to do to improve my ability to interact with youth in these contexts?** (e.g., Learn more about the impacts of trauma, mental health, justice involvement or similar challenges on youth behavior. Spend time practicing the way I want to handle myself when I'm feeling reactive to a youth. Reach out to a counselor to discuss what I'm experiencing and my goals for my interactions with youth.)

GROW

- **What action(s) will I take this week to address personal challenges to my ability to interact with youth with relational challenges?** (e.g., Excuse myself for a few minutes when feeling overstimulated. Process new insights related to my discomfort with a confidant or counselor. Write down any beliefs I hold about myself that may need some attention due to their influence on being the person I want to be for youth.)
- **In what way(s) will I strengthen the way I show up for youth experiencing relational challenges in my life?**

YOUTH ACTIVITY:

EXPLORING TRUST & THE SUPPORT I NEED



Estimated Time: 15 mins

Purpose of Activity: To help youth reflect on what trust and support look like for them in the context of challenges and practice expressing their needs to trusted adults.

REFLECT

If it helps, think about a relationship in your life in which you feel (or felt) safe and that you can trust that individual. Consider what they do to help you to feel that way when answering the following questions.

Reflect on the following questions and capture your responses somewhere.

- What makes a relationship feel safe to me?
- What qualities in an adult make me feel like I can trust them in the moment and over time?
- What makes it hard for me to trust or open up to adults?
- When I'm struggling with hard emotions or situations, what kinds of support do I need most from trusted adults in my life?

ARTICULATE

Considering your responses to the reflection questions above, begin putting language to your trust and support needs by answering the questions below.

- One thing that makes me feel safe with adults is _____.
- I can build trust more easily with adults when _____.
- When I am struggling or not acting like myself, the support I need at that time looks like _____.

EXPRESS

As you feel comfortable, practice sharing your responses with individual trusted adults in your life or in a group discussion led by trusted adult facilitator. Remember: You may have similar or different needs as others, and all responses are OK. Sharing your needs with trusted adults is a sign of strength and should be done only as you feel ready. It can help both of you build a stronger relationship by them knowing how to support you better.

Facilitation Tips:

- Create a safe, non-judgmental space. Emphasize there are no right or wrong answers.
- Offer options: journaling, drawing, or private thinking.
- Be comfortable with silence and respect if youth choose not to share.
- Model vulnerability if appropriate (e.g., "One thing that helps me feel supported is...").
- Validate all responses. Gently connect back to protective beliefs when natural.

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