



SANFORD
HARMONY



Relationship
Science
Summit

Creating Harmonious Communities:

Relationship Science for Learning,
Belonging, and Human Flourishing

**By: Nick Yoder, PhD; Doug Fisher, PhD; Mark Milliron, PhD;
Scott Page; and Terrell Strayhorn, PhD**



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Human Relationships: A Call to Action

The Pressing Need

Relationship science elevates the importance of relationships—from birth through our most seasoned years. Humans, by nature, are social creatures, given our needs for protection, access to resources in our communities, knowledge from those around us, and general love and support during tough times (Coan & Sbarra, 2015; Siegel, 2013). Relationships are so ingrained in us that they influence our brain development, and in turn, brain development influences the types of social connections and interactions we have (Lamblin et al., 2017).

However, relationships—authentic, real-world relationships—have begun to take a back seat in modern society. Even with easier and faster ways for us to connect with one another—and with the promise of artificial intelligence to “free up” our time to do the tasks that make us more uniquely human—young people and adults are feeling lonelier and more isolated than ever before (CDC, 2023). Young people are even spending less time interacting with their peers and adults than they ever have (Twenge et al., 2019).

Given the changes in how the world is operating with social media, AI, and even transportation that “connects” us in different ways, and the importance of relationships for human development across the lifespan, it is time to reinvigorate what we have learned thus far in relationship science and begin the next chapter of relationship science—from the research, to practice, to scale—to address these modern, pressing needs.

Sanford Relationship Science Summit and Paper Goal

This paper, and the Sanford Relationship Science Summit in October 2026 hosted by National University and Sanford Learning, proposes a cross-sector framework and action agenda for advancing relationship science through research, practice, policy, and investment. The goal is to create a call to action to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in education, healthcare, extended learning spaces (e.g., museums, zoos), families, and philanthropists to create a collaborative ecosystem of research, practice, and policy on relationship science to support the well-being, learning, and overall development of young people and the adults who support them.

Specifically, in this paper, we offer a high-level overview of what relationship science is, our framework for it, and our call to action.



Defining Relationship Science

Relationship science has a long history, with decades of research spanning multiple fields, including developmental and cognitive psychology, neuroscience, education, sociology, and public health (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008; Reis & Mizrahi, 2026). It further draws on multiple theoretical perspectives, including interdependent theory, attachment theory, evolutionary theory, and intergroup contact theory (Finkel & Simpson, 2015; Martin et al., 2017). **Relationship science** is the study of (Finkel & Simpson, 2015; Hanish et al., 2016; Vangelisti et al., 2026):

- how people form, maintain, and change (and sometimes close) multiple types of relationships across the lifespan
- how people experience those relationships, and the ways individuals and context influence relationships
- relationship processes or the stages and shifts in the dynamics of relationships as they progress.
- outcomes related to relationships, including how well relationships are doing and the outcomes associated with them

The field of relationship science has traditionally been isolated, in that researchers typically focus on a single domain or type of relationship—caregivers, siblings, peers, teachers, romantic relationships, or community members. However, some studies have begun to combine the effects of multiple relationship types. For instance, Englund and colleagues (2011) examined how the quality of relationships during developmental periods influenced relationships in subsequent developmental periods (e.g., caregivers in early childhood, peers in adolescence, and romantic partners in adulthood). They found that relationship quality is predicated on prior relationships, suggesting that people build the skills needed to nurture their relationships later in life.

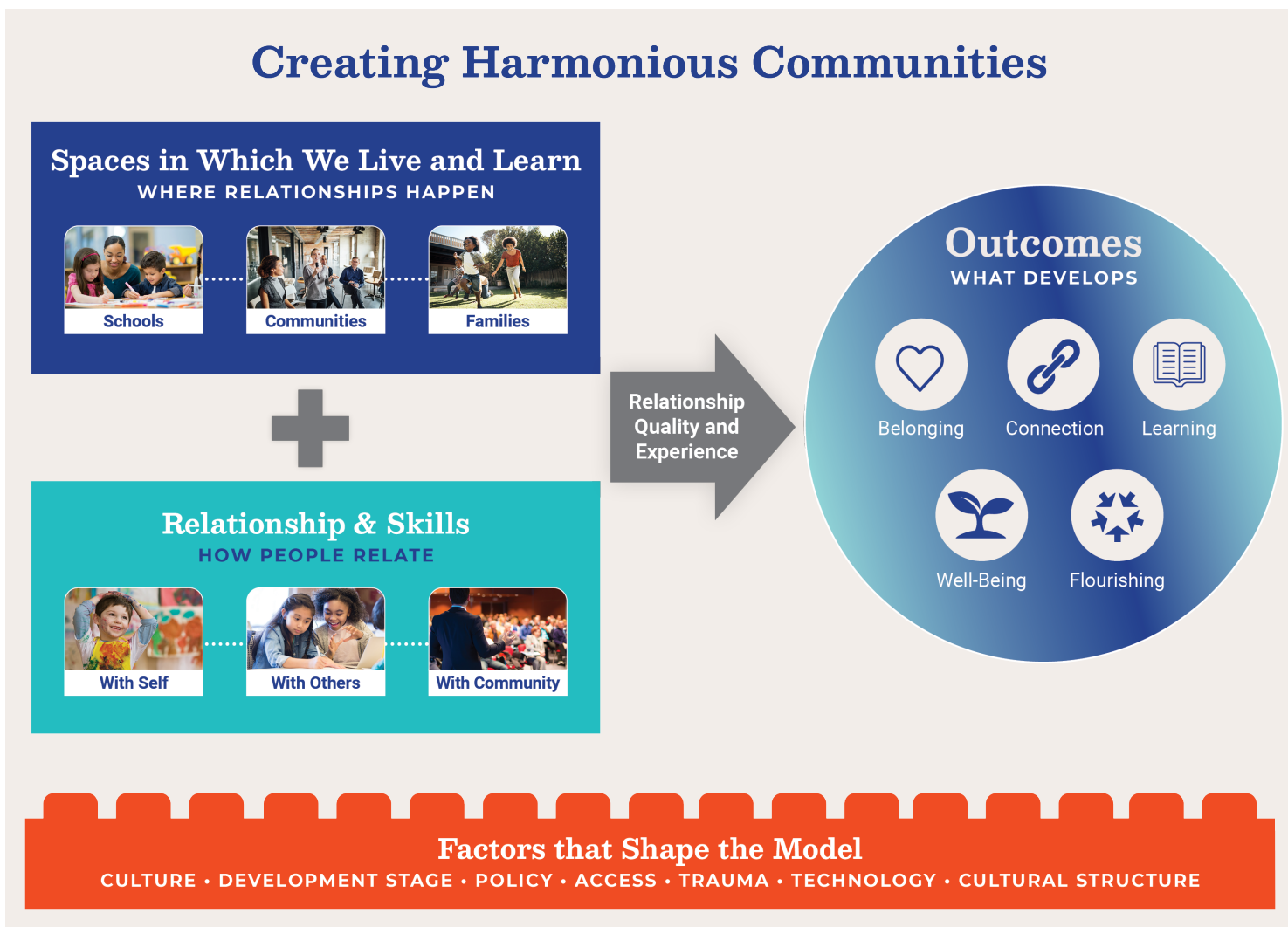
Seok and Doom (2022) also sought to understand the effect of the intersection of different types of relationships. They found that adolescent relationships generally evidenced one of three types of relationships: (a) high support from all groups—parents, friends, teachers, and other adults; (b) low teacher support and high support from all other groups; and (c) low teacher/adult support and moderate parent/friend support. They found that although the first two groups did not differ, when adolescents only had low and moderate support, this group had more depressive symptoms from adolescence to adulthood and lower quality in their romantic relationships later in life.

Relationship Science Framework

The sample findings just discussed underscore the need for the field of relationship science to move beyond a focus on single types of relationships or single spaces. We need to begin to understand the complexities and dynamics within and between relationships for individuals, interpersonally, and within communities. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate that relationships serve as both a context and a condition in which young people develop, as well as a mechanism through which skills, beliefs, and identities are shaped (Lamblin et al., 2017).

As such, our core framework for developing harmonious communities suggests that it is both the context (or spaces in which we live and learn) and the relationship types and skills (relationships with self, others, and community) we have, combined together and through the quality and experiences of those relationships, that influence the outcomes associated with those relationships (see Figure 1). In this paper, harmonious communities are not communities without conflict or difference. They are communities in which people experience belonging, dignity, safety, mutual responsibility, and the capacity to navigate disagreement and repair harm.

Figure 1. Relationship Science to Form Harmonious Communities for Healthy Learning



The Spaces in Which We Live and Learn

Relationship science showcases that we develop multiple types of relationships in schools (pre-K through higher education), communities (out-of-school time, sports, healthcare), and with families (parents, siblings, and extended family), in which we build relationships with peers and classmates, teachers and other adults in school buildings, role models, coaches, mentors, as well as our various family members. Each of these spaces—and the relationships within them—sets the stage for how we grow, develop, learn, receive support, and feel that we belong. In each of these spaces, we must be intentional about the systems, structures, and practices (Hanish et al., 2016) we put in place to facilitate healthy relationships. For instance, the ways in which classrooms are structured for students to engage in collaborative work, the drills coaches use to build trust and connection among team members, or the rehearsals that ensure artists feel safe exploring characters or various mediums; each of these spaces can incorporate intentional activities so that the individuals can build meaningful relationships.

Relationship Types and Skills

In addition to creating intentional opportunities to build, maintain, and nurture relationships and the healthy environments that support them, science also shows that humans need essential skills to sustain those relationships (Hanish et al., 2016), and the skills may vary depending on which relationship type we are considering (self, others, community). Because each person is unique in their experiences, culture, personality, and abilities, it is important that we each develop durable skills that help us navigate the complexities of being human as these skills are predictive of multiple important short and long-term outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, public health outcomes, full-time employment) (Cipriano et al., 2023; Heckman et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2015) across relationship types.



¹Oftentimes people use the terms healthy relationships and relationship quality as interchangeable. However, we refer to healthy relationships as the outcome—they are characterized as safe, supportive, trustworthy, and consistent; whereas relationship quality is about the degree to which relationships are safe, supportive, trustworthy, and consistent. In other words, individuals can have low- and high-quality relationships.

As we identify the needed conditions, and supports that offer them, it is also critically important to define how we think about relationships, including:

Relationships with self are having an understanding—a relationship—with who you are as an individual (Tsang et al., 2012). When you develop a relationship with yourself, you have a strong self-concept and sense of purpose, feel a sense of self-efficacy, have agency in your decisions, have clear goals and strategies to achieve them, and can regulate your emotions and behaviors, particularly when you feel stressed (Blattner et al., 2013; Compas et al., 2017; Elias, 2019).

Relationships with others include interpersonal relationships with those around you. They can be close relationships with family members, peers, or mentors; they can be shorter-term relationships with classmates or doctors; or they can be acquaintances you meet at events or on vacation. Each of these types of relationships can be meaningful to some degree. The relationships depend on the quality or degree of trust, commitment, and connection (Letkiewicz et al., 2023).

Relationships with others also include the skills needed: one's ability to build, maintain, nurture, and at times end relationships through healthy communication, problem solving, and teamwork, along with the ability to empathize, stand up for others, and demonstrate honesty and integrity (Hanish et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2017).

Relationships with the community occur in the various communities to which you belong (e.g., schools, artistic groups, sports leagues, or faith-based organizations). When you have these communities, you foster a sense of belonging and purpose within them; you contribute meaningfully to them and share a sense of social responsibility (Smith et al., 2026). The communities you belong to help you identify with who you are as a person and the values that you hold, as well as the actions that you take to be a member of that community (Haslam et al., 2020).

Relationship Quality and Experience

Research demonstrates that the influence of relationships is more about the quality of those relationships than the number of relationships we have (Letkiewicz et al., 2023). Quality in relationships is the degree to which someone feels cared for, supported, valued, and a sense of belonging (Letkiewicz et al., 2023). Healthy relationships occur when those involved are emotionally responsive to one another, are honest and open in their communication, have healthy boundaries that are discussed, focus on repair rather than blame after a conflict, and are generally reciprocal in nature rather than coercive (La Guardia & Patrick, 2008).

Smith and colleagues (2025) further outline four defining features of close relationships:

- 1 a strong relationship exists in how each person's actions influence the others
- 2 multiple types of interactions occur between individuals
- 3 interactions happen frequently
- 4 the relationship occurs over a longer period of time

Notice that in their definition of close relationships, they do not mention the quality of those relationships. That is because having a close relationship with someone does not necessarily mean it is a healthy one. Relationships can influence both healthy and unhealthy development, depending on how they are characterized (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008). For example, peer relationships and friendship quality include features such as companionship, trust, intimacy, and the ability to resolve conflicts (Alsarrani et al., 2022), whereas unhealthy relationships may involve manipulation, surface-level engagement, or blame, among other behaviors.

Relationship-Driven Outcomes

Multiple benefits exist for those with high-quality (or healthy) relationships, including health (e.g., reductions in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and drug use), mortality, well-being, and romantic relationship quality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Lamblin et al., 2017; Letkiewicz et al., 2023; Seok & Doom, 2022). For instance:

The quality of peer relationships was associated with a variety of factors on subjective well-being (e.g., decreases in depression and loneliness, and improvements in life satisfaction, happiness, and self-esteem) (Alsarrani et al., 2022).

Emotional regulation and relationship development are bidirectionally related: emotional regulation promotes relationship development, and positive relationships support the development of emotional regulation (Farley & Kim-Spoon, 2014).

Experiencing positive social support in adolescence yields long-term benefits, including fewer depressive symptoms, improved health-promoting behaviors and mental health indicators, and better relationships in adulthood (for a review, see Seok & Doom, 2022).

The degree to which young people continue to engage in in-person social relationships and the ways in which adults and young people use social media and technology influence the negative effects (e.g., feelings of isolation and mental health concerns) of digital use more so than the dosage (Twenge et al., 2019; Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023).

The Call to Action

Multiple questions, practices, and systems need to be tested and put in place through the study of relationships (e.g., Reis & Mizrahi, 2026), including, for example:

How do culture and context influence relationships? For instance, how much responsibility do we put on individuals compared to the system to create the conditions for healthy relationships?

How do various types of close relationships form, maintain, and impact individuals and the community throughout the lifespan? What role do coercive or harmful relationships play in development across the lifespan?

How do we create eco-systems of relationship-based practices for individuals across sectors (e.g., education, healthcare, non-profits, faith-based organizations)? To what degree do the quality and quantity of relationships in each of these areas influence outcomes?

How do we create more holistic interventions to support relationship development across the multiple spaces in which young people live and learn? How do we consider cultural differences in how relationships are understood as we develop these relationships?

To help answer these questions, we need to cultivate the research and practice communities across education, expanded learning, healthcare, sports, families, and philanthropy to mobilize for impact. Specifically, National University, through its Sanford School of Education, JFK School of Psychology and Social Sciences, Cause Research Institute, Sanford Learning, and Sanford Institute of Philanthropy, with its partners, plan to:

STUDY THE SCIENCE: We aim to build on evidence from the science of relationships to better understand the relationship ecosystem around young people and across the lifespan. We want to better understand how different types of relationships, and the ways they intersect for individuals and communities, influence human development, learning, and workforce preparation and engagement, particularly as human relationships have become more central, now more so than ever.

PUT THE SCIENCE INTO PRACTICE: We want to bring relationship science to life across multiple communities where we live and learn. Specifically, we want to understand how the conditions, and intersections of conditions, influence relationship-driven outcomes and the practices that are consistent and unique across those contexts to ensure that all young people and adults feel seen, heard, valued, and that they belong to various communities and have the interpersonal and personal relationships to meet the challenges they face.

MOBILIZE SCIENCE FOR IMPACT: To build meaningful relationships and form harmonious communities, no single community can do this alone. We need to better understand the ecosystem in which we all live and learn and how to scale practices across these various settings. This is why it will be incredibly important to not do this work alone, but include philanthropy, education, expanded learning spaces, healthcare, and families. This will require investment—human and capital—to ensure that relationships are more central to the work we do moving forward.

Conclusion

With AI ever evolving, we often hear that human relationships and connections will be more important than ever before, and that AI will help free up time to nurture those relationships. However, with young people spending less time in physical interactions with others and both young people and adults feeling lonelier now than ever before, are we sufficiently prioritizing relationships? Are we prioritizing taking the time to nurture relationships, build trust and commitment to one another, and invite people to spend time building relationships with themselves and others? Do we have science, practical strategies, and the ecosystem and infrastructure to prioritize relationships within the current climate?

Our goal at Sanford Learning and National University is to bring together researchers, practitioners, policymakers, healthcare workers, philanthropists, and others to better understand how we prioritize relationships for young people and throughout their lifespan, and to understand how relationships grow and fluctuate over time and across these various spaces. We are in a unique moment in time, and one that is primed for us to collectively come together to center relationships in each of our work.



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