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FOR HEALTHY LIVING  
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

# CONNECTIONS:

## The Impact of Relationships on Vulnerable Youth

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## Executive Summary

Every day, individuals must utilize self-regulation to interact in the workplace, in society, and in social settings. Research suggests that increasing self-regulation skills will lead to higher income, better financial planning, and fewer engagements in high-risk activities, as well as decreased health costs (Murray & Rosanbalm, 2017). Unfortunately, not all people have the opportunities and guidance that support optimal self-regulation development, especially young people with histories of trauma, abuse, and neglect. The public impact of supporting vulnerable youth to increase self-regulation skills is immense. These young people will become the next policy makers, scientists, medical professionals, educators, and community members who will contribute to the collective economy and raise families of their own. An investment in their success is an investment in society's success.

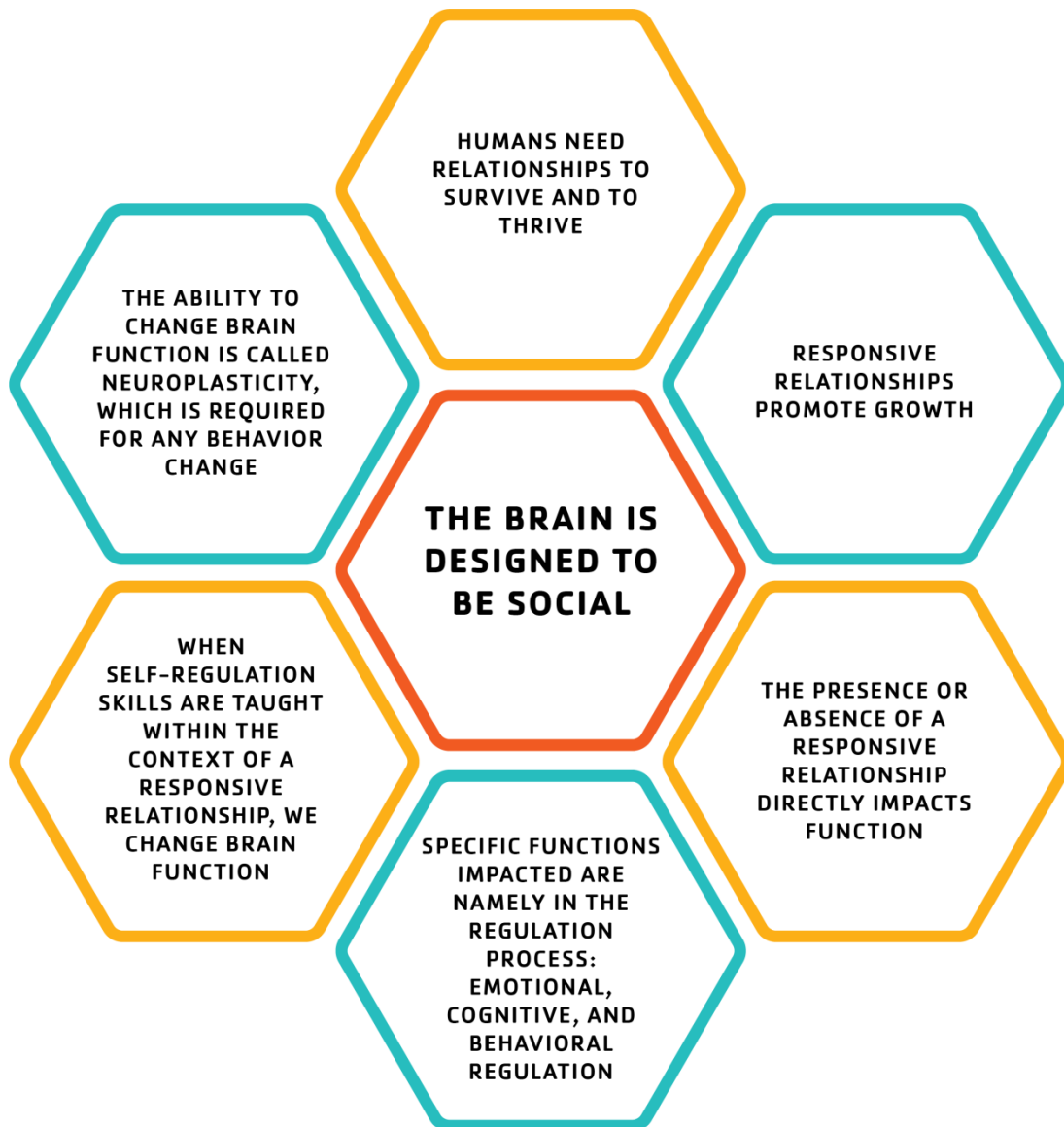
Self-regulation skills are the foundation for lifelong functioning and allow individuals to organize thoughts, regulate emotions, guide behaviors, set goals, plan accordingly, and organize complex tasks. Self-regulation can be easily defined as "the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions" (Murray & Rosanbalm, 2017).

Vulnerable youth are at a disadvantage when navigating the transition to adulthood. With fractured families, strained educational histories, insufficient financial resources, and overwhelming stress, they are less likely than their peers to experience healthy, stable adulthoods. New research suggests a glimmer of hope exists for this population, and it lies within self-regulation to increase successful outcomes in adulthood.

The YMCA of San Diego County's Connections Project, funded by the Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, sought to help child-welfare-involved, transition age youth increase self-regulation skills, namely emotion regulation for the purposes of increasing relational competencies. Impulse control, distress tolerance, and the ability to consider perspectives are core tenets of social interaction. The brain is designed to be social; humans need relationships to survive and to thrive (Black, 2017). The absence of relationships is dangerous to our health and well-being; all people need supportive networks, social interaction, and a sense of belonging (Umberson & Montez, 2010). The presence or absence of responsive relationships directly impacts brain development, namely the regulation process (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). However, many youth navigate the complexities of adulthood without the critical relational supports necessary to maintain well-being. When we focus on relationships as well as teach regulation skills within the context of a responsive relationship, we change the brain (Black, 2017).

The Connections Project findings are promising and aligned with current best practice evidence. After twelve months of participation in one-on-one coaching and relational wellness classes in the Connections Project, participants saw an increase in social conduct, emotional regulation, self-esteem, and resiliency. There was a decrease in risky behaviors and activities, a 25% increase in employment, and \$1.37 increase in hourly wage after 12 months, on average.

These findings are significant in that our approach, centered on self-regulation skills and social networks, is cost-effective and scalable.



## **Self-Regulation: Why is it important?**

Self-regulation serves as a foundation for lifelong functioning, and it is evident that the ability to regulate cognition, emotion, and behavior creates a pathway to well-being (Murray & Rosanbalm, 2017). Optimal development of self-regulation requires the presence of multiple environmental and contextual elements, all of which are beyond an individual's control, especially as children. Self-regulation is extremely complex and involves integrating past experiences and complex information for processing, such as following social norms and responding effectively to social cues, managing emotional arousal, effortful control and attention, goal-setting and planning, perspective-taking, persistence, self-soothing, relaxation, empathy, and compassion (Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos, & Hamoudi, 2015). It is clear that this dynamic, yet responsive, set of complex cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes serves as a foundation for functioning, and functioning well, in our society.

During adolescence and young adulthood, youth begin to solidify their ideas about themselves and the world around them within their environmental and social contexts. The majority of youth spend this time celebrating milestones and moving from one life stage to another as they become the adults that will impact their communities and society as a whole. However, for many vulnerable youth, trauma survivors and those involved in child welfare systems, experiencing extreme poverty or homelessness, this is not the case. Their transition to adulthood is fraught with chronic stress, trauma, fractured social systems, and instability of basic needs such as food and housing.

Young adulthood offers multiple opportunities to set goals and plan for the future. Commitments to education and other career training drive goal attainment and fuel growing intrinsic motivation to persist. Instead, of experiencing the thrill moving into university housing or anticipating their first day of work in a meaningful field, vulnerable youth, especially those in foster care, agonize over how they will make ends meet, wonder if they will find a partner or friend that truly cares for them, and possibly end up in a systems cycle they hoped to avoid replicating.

In such contexts, the development of healthy self-regulation skills is inhibited, and maladaptive regulation skills can instead prevail. Stress and poverty make self-regulation more difficult; the brain becomes primed to overreact to normal stressors and cognitive energy is quickly depleted, making it difficult to persist at task-oriented action. While the development of self-regulation skills and abilities is complex and occurs over time, it is responsive to intervention and malleable, especially during adolescence and young adulthood (Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos, & Hamoudi, 2015). Current research shows that adolescence and

young adulthood present a developmental opportunity to impact neurological flexibility and self-regulation, especially when the opportunities during early childhood have been missed.

The Connections Project built the intervention on these core pillars, utilizing an evidence-based, skill-building curriculum designed to increase emotional regulation. The program adapted Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) to meet the needs of this population as well as organizational capacity. In skills classes and one-on-one coaching, participants were exposed to topics ranging from mindfulness to radical acceptance with the goal of rebuilding their capacity to respond appropriately to stressors, engage in meaningful connection with others, and manage impulses. Staff were trained extensively on the adapted method, and the program used continuous quality improvement activities to refine and adjust service delivery along the way.

Over six years of programming have yielded promising results in emotional, employment, and educational attainments. Participants utilized self-regulation to increase resiliency, social conduct, emotional regulation, self-esteem, and decrease high risk activities. With these newly developed capacities, youth were able to increase the quantity and quality of their relationships and realize the associated benefits that come from strong support networks.

### **Self-Regulation & Relationships**

The importance of self-regulation on the ability to build strong social networks cannot be overstated. Relationships, especially healthy ones, require empathy, thoughtful planning, and interpersonal skills that are developed and maintained over time. The collective power of individual relationships occurs through the expansion of social networks, and these networks allow the acquisition of two key types of support: emotional and instrumental (Seeman, 2008). Both are required to support a person holistically as they navigate the complexities of social living. Robust support systems are associated with higher stress tolerance, access to resources, higher income, and general well-being.

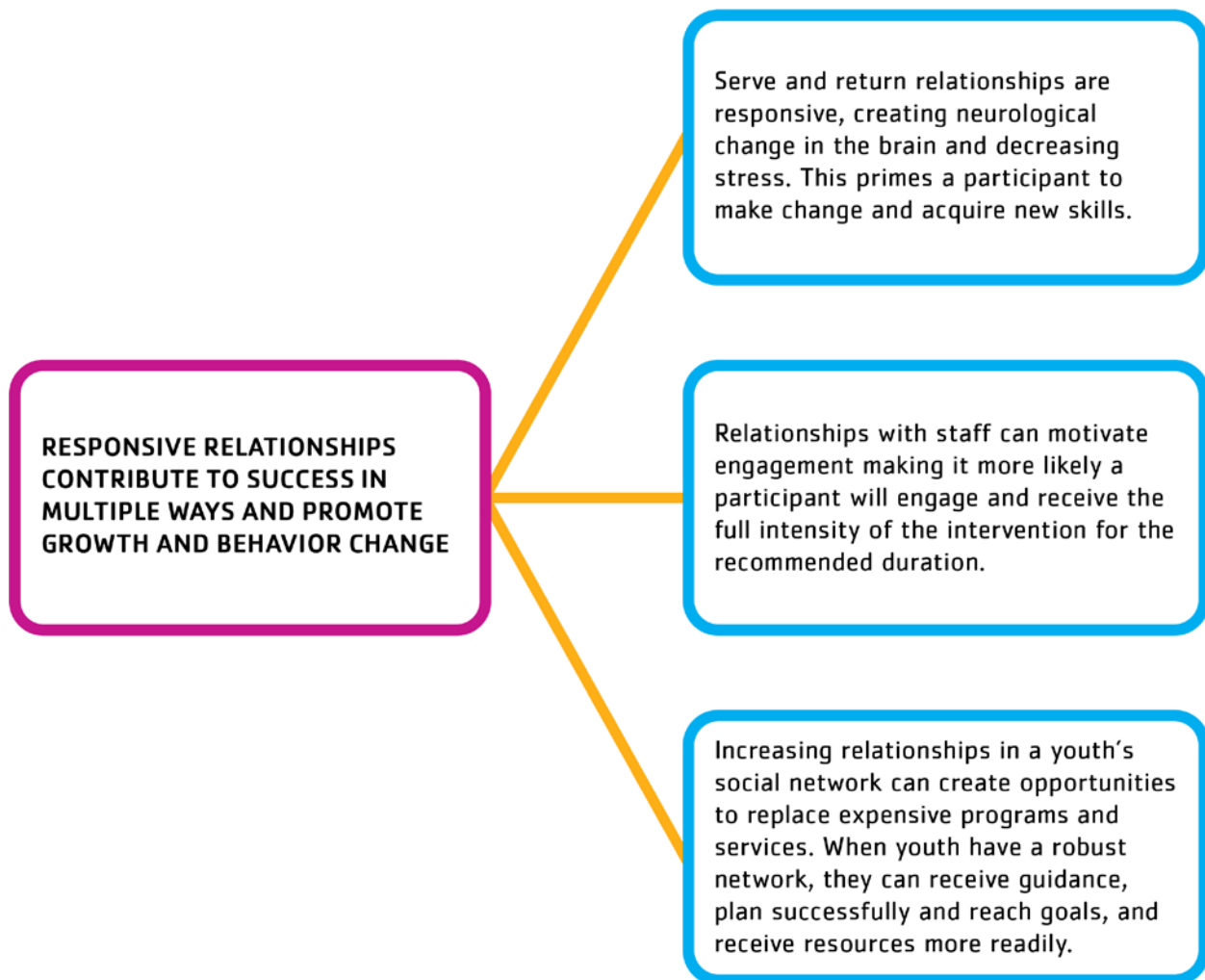
Strong relationships with others have a positive effect on overall well-being. Evidence suggests that relationships with peers and family are crucial for positive psychological youth development and have a positive effect on mental health (Perry, 2006). Further, the Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings (Ross, 2018) recently recommended that increasing relationships among vulnerable youth greatly improved a youth's ability to attain economic stability and develop career mobility. Research also suggests that adults with robust and close connections are happier, healthier, live longer, and are buffered from stress and pain (Harvard

Women's Health Watch, 2010; Umberson & Montez, 2010; Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 2001) though, sociologists have confirmed that the "costs and benefits of social relationships are not distributed equally in the population" (Umberson & Montez, 2010, p. 54).

If access to strong support systems is imperative, and the ability to interact with others socially while maintaining intimate relationships is clearly associated with success and well-being, then strategic investments will boost these internal assets for our most vulnerable populations. It is not enough to help a young person develop a resume or complete a job application for example; such "hard skills" alone will not produce sustainable results that will ensure their success in the world of work. Intentional, evidence-informed focus on self-regulation skills will help youth navigate the complexities of gaining economic stability and social wellness to ensure their success beyond supportive programs and services.

Supporting brain-based processes that drive decision-making, emotion management, and behavior change are essential for positive development. Therefore, opportunities to practice adaptable thinking, experience emotional range, and successful decision-making within the context of supportive relationships guide neuroplasticity (Black, 2017). Responsive relationships promote growth at the biological level, increasing the likelihood that maladaptive responses used in the past will be replaced with new, healthy responses to stress.

The Connections Project based its intervention on the understanding that adolescence and young adulthood are developmental opportunities to create growth and promote neuroplasticity through relationships and through practice of important self-regulation skills. The more youth are able to practice their new skills, the more likely they are to use those skills in the face of adversity and stress, promoting cognitive, behavioral, and emotional regulation.



### *Buffering & Co-Regulation*

Two important elements necessary in optimal self-regulation development are co-regulation and buffering (Murray, Rosanbalm, & Christopoulos, 2016). Buffering refers to the idea of protection from environmental stressors, such as housing and food instability or frequent placement disruptions. When youth are buffered from such stressors, their neuro capacity is freed up to continue to develop positive self-regulation skills. Co-regulation is also an essential element in positive self-regulation development. Co-regulation is an interactional process between a youth and a caregiver (teacher, parent, foster parent, social worker, mentor, etc.) that is warm and responsive. When a youth interacts with a caregiver in this way, they are made to feel safe and secure, further reducing demand on already overloaded cognitive and emotional centers (Murray et al, 2016).

Successful co-regulation includes the following:

- Coaching and Teaching: Opportunities to practice skills, modeling, and a tiered approach to utilize skills in increasingly stressful and difficult situations.
- Relationships: Warm and responsive relationships with adults, caregivers, and mentors are the cornerstone of any service provision with vulnerable young people. Youth must feel free of judgment, safe, and respected, and should be met with compassion when they make mistakes and navigate difficult decisions.
- Environment: Basic needs should be met; youth cannot attempt to acquire or increase regulatory functioning while dealing with basic need instability or chaotic environmental stressors. Protection and buffering from environmental stressors is important when increasing these skills.

### **The C.A.V.E. Approach**

The Connections Project team understands that access to healthy, meaningful relationships is limited for vulnerable youth populations, especially child-welfare involved youth and believes a lack of focus on relationships will only continue to place these youth at risk for significant life challenges. Connection to others is a physiological need and must be treated as fundamental to serving this population. Responsive relationships prime the brain to make critical changes, which reduces stress and allows youth to optimize skill development. Opportunities to help youth build essential relational and self-regulation skills are plentiful for service providers engaged with this population.

Evidence suggests that access to social supports, social networks, and relationships positively impact mental health and psychological well-being (Perry, 2006; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010). These social networks consist of persons from several naturally occurring domains in a young person's life: peers, family, and close family friends (Perry, 2006).

Youth who spend time in the foster care system experience significant and disproportionate rates of social network disruption (Perry, 2006), which negatively affects their ability to achieve outcomes in adulthood. Child welfare systems are charged with protecting vulnerable children however, foster care often is "confusing, destabilizing, and at times damaging" (Bass et al, 2009, p.25). Public child welfare systems have failed in ensuring that children in care have access to a healing environment (Hayek et al, 2014, Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; Pecora et al, 2009). Trauma and instability during childhood place this group at increased risk for negative social functioning, mental health issues, and maladaptive behaviors (Bass et al, 2004; Hayek et al, 2014; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010; Pecora et al, 2009; Perry, 2006).



When service providers are well-equipped to connect with clients, they can be the catalyst for a client's relational wellness, healing and skill development. As suggested earlier, co-regulation and buffering are also critical to the development of optimal self-regulation skills. Buffering and co-regulating relationships includes coaching, mentoring, and caregiving. Individuals that work with youth in a variety of environments, such as teachers, social workers, youth service workers, etc., are in a unique position to help fill this essential role.

The Connections Project team developed the C.A.V.E. Approach to help those who interact with youth on a regular basis identify and understand the qualities and actions necessary to engage in warm and responsive relationships.

The approach was born out of necessity when it became evident that Connections Project clients responded particularly well to worker/staff with certain aptitudes or characteristics. In order to increase participant engagement, the Connections Project initially offered gift cards loaded with significant dollar amounts to all participants. However, participants in this project did not exude more motivation or engagement than in other programs with less plentiful resources. The Connections Project team quickly realized that participants were not motivated to participate solely by incentives. After a thorough assessment of qualitative data, it became clear that participants were strongly motivated to participate by the relationship with their Coaches. Coaches also identified their connections with the youth as being highly influential to their participant's success in the program.

Based on these findings, and on previous experience, the Connections Project team developed a detailed description of how the worker-participant connection is formed as well as the concepts central to developing and maintaining that connection for the purposes of co-regulation and optimal self-regulation development. That work resulted in the C.A.V.E. approach, described below:

# THE C.A.V.E. APPROACH STRENGTHENS CONNECTIONS:



## COMPASSION:

Compassion is about the human experience, the recognition that we are imperfect as people and that we share this imperfection no matter our backgrounds. Compassion can be defined as empathy plus the desire to help. Empathy alone leaves individuals emotionally exhausted. Compassion allows for increased connection, it challenges the shame our participants feel, and it allows for greater vulnerability in a safe environment. Increased vulnerability is a key factor in creating change. Giving youth the space and safety to be vulnerable, we can better help them better change their thinking and behavior.



## AWARENESS:

Awareness is pure observation and is tied to the need to suspend judgment. It is common for workers to guide clients through a lens filtered by their personal values and judgments. The goal is to suspend those values and judgments in order to truly be effective. When workers take the time to be fully aware of their thoughts and feelings, they can better cope with stress, reduce negative emotions and anxiety, and increase positive emotions and self-compassion. An aware worker can better connect with a client and increase the likelihood they will meaningfully engage in services.



## VALIDATION:

Validation is the act of recognizing another's internal experience and communicating acceptance of that experience. Validation combats rejection, judging, and the need to "fix" another's problem. Validating a client's experience prior to attempting to help can allow for more information to be communicated, increase the client's trust in the worker, and help the worker to better understand what motivates the client. Validation can help prevent miscommunication and spare hurt feelings.



## EMPOWERMENT:

For the purposes of the Connections Project, Empowerment has been defined as offering a client access to a range of choices and options, even if those options may not be in their best interest. It recognizes that youth have the opportunity to make any choice, good or bad, and ensures youth know they have the personal agency to make those choices. Empowerment helps a client to take control of their life as an individual, especially after being involved in a system that regularly makes choices on their behalf. It is a new feeling for most child-welfare-involved youth, and one that requires practice to ensure youth can identify the variety of choices they have.

The Connections Team also developed a three-hour training to help service providers conceptualize the C.A.V.E. approach. The team trained over 250 child welfare workers from public and private settings and obtained qualitative data regarding their experience. Data revealed that the training helped workers build judgment-free relationships with youth and became more aware of their personal practices and attitudes with youth. Training attendees moved toward improving relationships and communication with youth utilizing the C.A.V.E. principles. Service providers noticed a positive shift in their manner when working with youth and spent time validating youth's feelings. Over 85% of training participants were able to apply the concepts in their work with youth and 79% thought the application was very effective.

## Impact of C.A.V.E. Approach

The C.A.V.E. approach complements program interventions designed to help youth improve outcomes in multiple domains. C.A.V.E. is designed to be useful and

practical in any setting that requires meaningful personal interaction, from youth development to social services to education to healthcare. C.A.V.E. is a vehicle for co-regulation, further supporting optimal self-regulation skill development, even when the intervention is not focused on that particular outcome.

If relationships that promote growth must be warm and responsive, then C.A.V.E. offers workers a set of concrete characteristics that can help form this type of relationship while ensuring that service providers can coach, model, reinforce, and coach self-regulation skills (Murray & Rosanbalm, 2017a). By combining the approach with an evidence-informed intervention, service providers will increase the client's consumption of program services, making it more likely they will experience positive outcomes.

The C.A.V.E. Approach has been shown to influence the following:

- **Engagement:** Participant engagement, especially among young adults and adolescents, is a constant battle for service providers. Findings from the Connections Project study suggest that a focus on the relationship between the worker and the client will increase engagement. When a client meaningfully engages in services, dosage of the intervention increases, potentially leading to more positive outcomes.
- **Retention:** Retention in services is another obstacle for service providers. When interventions require long-term engagement or multiple touch points such as participation in classes, groups, or multiple meetings, the relationship is a motivating factor in youths' desire to remain part of program services. Again, when participants receive the full dosage of an intervention, positive outcomes increase.
- **Worker Mindset:** The concepts in C.A.V.E. allow workers to engage in self-care practices on a more regular basis. It is well documented that mindful awareness has positive physiological and psychological benefits for the user. Workers in the helping fields are subject to high rates of emotional exhaustion and self-care practices are imperative to maintain high-quality workers. Self-regulation is important not only for our participants, but workers as well. C.A.V.E. can help workers increase their own self-regulation skills, further improving the likelihood of responsive relationship development.

All people need connection with others to be successful; social service clients are no exception. The relationship a client creates with their service provider can serve as a model for future relationships and allows the client a safe space to practice the use of newly acquired relational and self-regulation skills. Worker-client connections are the first step to assisting clients in the development of healthy, meaningful relationships in a variety of domains.

The C.A.V.E. approach provides a practical set of concepts that service providers can use to better relate to and connect with their clients in a warm and responsive manner in a variety of settings and objectively communicate the relevance of self-regulation for employment success and self-sufficiency (Murray & Rosanbalm, 2017a).

## Study Methods and Findings

The Connections Project was funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Children’s Bureau, beginning in 2011, in partnership with the County of San Diego Health & Human Services, Child Welfare Services. It included an external evaluation conducted by Harder + Company Community Research firm. The project was initially designed as a randomized controlled trial research study, however, due to difficulty recruiting and retaining participants, the required sample size for meaningful analysis was not possible. The Federal Project Officer and the cross-site evaluator recommended converting the study to a formative evaluation, which was more appropriate for new interventions like the one utilized in the project. The change was made halfway through the study, and the original control group was invited to participate in the project. Throughout the study period, all participants were asked to complete a series of assessment tools at designated time-points to assess change over time. The assessment tools were intended to measure various aspects of relational competence.

TOOL NAME	RELATIONAL COMPETENCY ASPECT
ECOMAPS	QUANTITY/QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS
EMOTION REGULATION CHECKLIST FOR ADOLESCENTS	EMPATHY, IMPULSE CONTROL, EMOTION REGULATION, SOCIAL CONDUCT
ROSENBERG’S SELF-ESTEEM SCALE	SELF-ESTEEM
14-ITEM RESILIENCE SCALE	RESILIENCY
INDIVIDUAL PROTECTIVE FACTORS INDEX	RESILIENCY, PROTECTIVE FACTORS
CASEY LIFE SKILLS	INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, AND AWARENESS
YOUTH RISK ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST	ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH-RISK BEHAVIORS
CONNECTIONS ASSESSMENT	HEALTHY CONNECTIONS AND HIGH-RISK BEHAVIORS
CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MINDFULNESS MEASURE	MINDFULNESS AND MINDFUL BEHAVIORS

### *Adapted DBT*

Choosing an evidence-based practice for the Connections Project intervention was difficult as there were limited choices that focused on ACF's targeted relational competencies: resiliency, emotion regulation, social conduct, empathy, and insight. The project team selected DBT as the foundation for the adapted curriculum because DBT assumes that a person "did not cause all of their own problems, but must solve them," that people are "doing the best that they can," and that dialectics, balancing opposites, will support "a life worth living" (Linehan, 1993, p. 49). DBT was developed by Dr. Marsha Linehan in the late 1980s to treat individuals diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. The designer of the adapted intervention had utilized DBT practices with child welfare involved youth as a licensed therapist and experienced positive feedback. Its origins are in behavior therapy and eastern mindfulness practices, and it aims to decrease a person's emotional reactivity while increasing their ability to self-regulate and respond skillfully. Adapted applications of Dr. Linehan's original skills manual, *Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder* (Linehan, 1993), are increasingly being used in various settings and with a variety of populations.

Consider that the Connections Project used a DBT spirit in the design of the intervention. While transition age youth face a number of barriers, limited communication skills and underdeveloped self-regulation skills were of particular focus in the design of the intervention. Project designers focused on targeting these two areas with the belief that successful transition to self-sufficiency and well-being is influenced by a young person's ability to regulate emotions, effectively problem solve, effectively communicate with others, and identify and maintain healthy relationships in all domains of life.

Because DBT has a robust evidence base supporting its efficacy with Borderline Personality Disordered clients, Connections designers chose it as a platform to create the project's intervention. Borderline Personality Disorder is typically characterized by chaotic interpersonal relationships and emotional dysregulation. Survivors of trauma often suffer from similar symptoms which made DBT a good fit for the Connections Project. It was never the intention for Connections to operate as a DBT-adherent project, therefore adaptation was necessary. Adaptations were made based on scope of practice and programmatic capacity to fully support clients. Clinical expertise was employed to guide adaptation and uphold fidelity where possible. Synthesis of developmental biology, trauma informed care, DBT theory and skills, and keen understanding of the needs of child welfare involved youth served as the frame for designing the Connections Project. Additionally, the intervention designed highlighted the importance of the relationship between coach and client to capitalize on neuroplasticity opportunities. Ultimately, Connections kept the core components of effective DBT skills training yet modified features to

better fit the program's relational case management model. The relational case management model consisted of weekly and/or monthly one-on-one sessions with a Connections Coach as well as 24-hour access to the coach for assistance in utilizing skills during crisis.

Vulnerable transition age youth, especially those in child welfare systems, experience a multitude of barriers ranging from obstacles in securing basic needs to addressing common daily inconveniences. Whatever the circumstance, service providers are all too familiar with the impact these barriers have on effective service provision and service consumption. Barriers to client engagement and retention were of major consideration to the success of the Connections Project. Potential barriers within DBT were identified and either adapted or eliminated. For example, DBT's use of commitment agreements, a treatment hierarchy, daily diary cards, and homework assignments were determined to be barriers to client engagement and retention and therefore eliminated. The Connections Project was a voluntary program available amid many other available services and utilized focus groups with youth, staff interviews, and project data to steer adaptations in real time.

## **Intervention Structure**

### *Individual Coaching*

Individual coaching sessions were conducted weekly or monthly between participants and their assigned Connections Coach. Meeting structure was not prescribed but focused instead on personalizing the concepts learned in skills classes to the individual participants' lives. Topics ranged from deeper skill acquisition, deficits of basic needs, relational crises, and goal setting. No matter the topic of conversation, Coaches utilized the C.A.V.E. approach and worked to support participants' application of DBT skills within their personal set of circumstances. This highly personalized, relationally focused case management approach was not conducive to the manualized directives of the formal DBT therapy model, further fueling the need for adaptation. Participants were able to practice new-found skills in real-time with the guidance of their Connections Coach. Participants were also able to contact their Coach during times of crisis for support in utilizing newly discovered skills via cell phone or text message 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

# INDIVIDUAL COACHING OUTPUTS

THE MOST COVERED TOPICS WERE:



MINDFULNESS



DISTRESS TOLERANCE

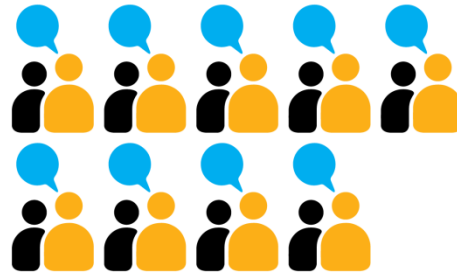


INTERPERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS

PARTICIPANTS DISCUSSED IMPROVING AND TERMINATING RELATIONSHIPS

ON AVERAGE, YOUTH ATTENDED 9 SESSIONS OFR APPROXIMATELY 59 MINUTES EACH

+ OR -



## Skills Classes

Weekly “wellness classes” focused on one of the four DBT skill topics through traditional teaching, audio-visual enhancements, practice opportunities, and organic conversation between participants. Skills classes were co-facilitated by a trained Connections Coach and Peer Coach (trained staff who are able to connect with participants through shared life experience) and were offered weekly. Classes began with youth-friendly mindfulness exercises to offer practice opportunities to improve present-time awareness and optimize didactic time. Each class ended with a brief gratitude exercise to encourage participants to cultivate thankfulness, which is shown to have positive impacts on well-being (Emmons, R. A., & Mishra, A., 2012).

# SKILL CLASS OUTPUTS

THE MOST COVERED TOPIC WAS:



MINDFULNESS

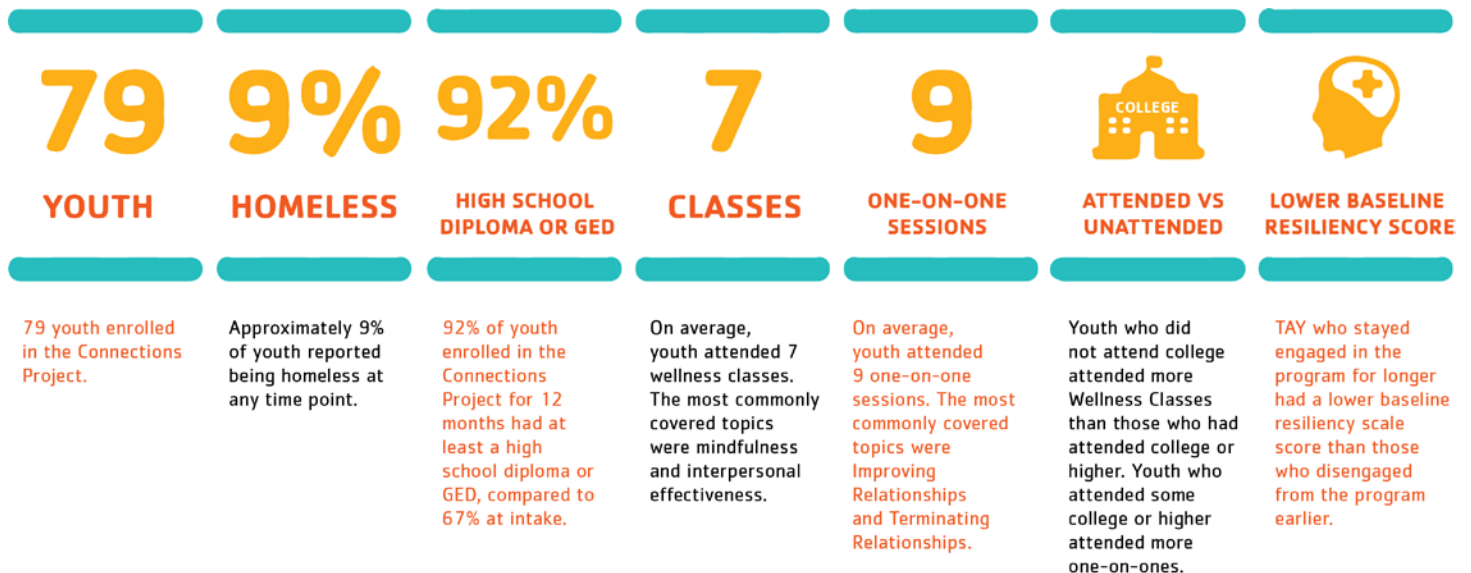
ON AVERAGE, YOUTH ATTENDED 6.5 CLASSES FOR APPROXIMATELY 87 MINUTES EACH



## Barrier Removal

Participants engaged in the Connections Project came to the program in various states of instability. Many youth were unstably housed, experienced food and basic needs insecurity, and were in need of immediate assistance in these areas. In order to facilitate increased engagement and accessibility to the intervention, the Connections Project utilized both financial and human resources to ensure that youth were stable enough to embark on the Connections Project journey. Financial resources in the form of “supportive services” were available for a host of needs from childcare, transportation, and hygiene product assistance to cell phone payments, clothing, and security deposits. Additionally, all staff assisted youth in identifying and accessing needed resources and services throughout the community. Staff attempted to avoid duplicating services offered through other programs or systems, however, Connections Coaches often became the youth’s sole confidant during times of intense crises or stress and Coaches needed to assist with stabilizing basic needs for the youth, regardless of services available elsewhere.

## Participant Characteristics & Significant Outcomes





### *Participant Characteristics*

Youth enrolled in the Connections Project ranged between the ages of 17 and 21, with the average age at intake around 20 years old. On average, participants had entered the foster care system at 9.5 years of age and had an average of 6 different child welfare placements during their time in the system. A slight majority of the youth enrolled were female. While the majority of the youth had a high school diploma/GED or higher (67%) at entry, only approximately 32% had attended some college. During focus groups, participants reported that they were initially motivated to participate in the study because of the gift card incentives. Additionally, some were motivated by a desire to improve the system and to help other youth, including their younger siblings, navigate the challenges in the child welfare system and have a better transition into adulthood than they did. However, as the project progressed, the participants reported that their relationships with their coaches became their primary motivation for ongoing engagement.

### *Relational Changes*

The Connections Project provided participants with the assistance to navigate complex relationships, identify negative relationships and develop positive relationships. Seventy-five percent (75%) of youth that attended three or more Wellness Classes made a quality gain in at least one relationship as reported through their Ecomaps.

Ninety-one percent (91%) of youth

who attended six or more one-on-one sessions made a quality gain in at least one relationship as reported through their Ecomaps. When asked about the effect the Connections Project had on their existing relationships, participants reported they had better control of the impulsivity, anger, and negative feelings that had previously impeded their ability to form and maintain relationships. They felt that participating in the Connections Project better equipped them to maintain professional relationships with case managers and other support staff as well as personal relationships with significant others, roommates, and friends.

**WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE EFFECT THE CONNECTIONS PROJECT HAD ON THEIR EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS, PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THEY HAD BETTER CONTROL OF THE IMPULSIVITY, ANGER, AND NEGATIVE FEELINGS THAT HAD PREVIOUSLY IMPEDED THEIR ABILITY TO FORM AND MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS.**

Through a series of surveys and focus groups, Connections Project participants provided feedback about their experience in the program, and it became clear that the relationships they formed with their Connections Coaches were a motivating

factor in their participation in the program. They also told us that the relationships they had with others were of great importance and they had a desire to develop skills to strengthen positive relationships and dissolve unhealthy relationships.

### *Participant Achievements*

Qualitative and quantitative analysis illuminated the many significant achievements among youth throughout their participation in the Connections Project:

- **Decreased High Risk Behaviors**  
Youth that remained in the project for at least one year had a significant decrease in the frequency in which they engaged in high-risk behaviors. In particular, there was a significant decrease in the frequency in which participants engaged in fighting and physical confrontation.
- **Self-Regulation Increase**  
They also had significant increases in their resiliency, emotion regulation and self-reported self-esteem.
- **Economic Stability & Mobility**  
Participants employed at 6-month or 1-year follow-up time points had an hourly rate of about \$1.37 more than at intake. Eighty five percent (85%) of participants had held a job, and 60% were employed at 12-month follow-up, a 25% increase from intake. Youth who attended some college or more were more likely to have a gain of five points or more in their assessments (67%) when compared to those who did not attend any college (21%).

## **PARTICIPANT ACHIEVEMENTS**

**YOUTH THAT REMAINED IN THE PROJECT FOR AT LEAST A YEAR HAD A SIGNIFICANT DECREASE IN THE FREQUENCY IN WHICH THEY ENGAGED IN HIGH RISK BEHAVIORS. IN PARTICULAR, THERE WAS A SIGNIFICANT DECREASE IN THE FREQUENCY IN WHICH PARTICIPANTS ENGAGED IN FIGHTING.**



**DECREASE**  
in high risk behaviors

**THEY ALSO HAD SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN THEIR RESILIENCY, IN THEIR EMOTION REGULATION, AND IN THEIR SELF-REPORTED SELF-ESTEEM.**



**INCREASE**  
in self-esteem

**PARTICIPANTS EMPLOYED AT 6 MONTH OR 1 YEAR FOLLOW-UP TIME POINTS HAD AN HOURLY RATE OF ABOUT \$1.37 MORE THAN AT INTAKE.**



**INCREASE**  
in emotion regulation

**85.2% OF PARTICIPANTS HAD HELD A JOB AND 60% WERE EMPLOYED AT THEIR 12 MONTH FOLLOW-UP, A 25% INCREASE FROM INTAKE.**



**INCREASE**  
in resiliency

**YOUTH WHO ATTENDED SOME COLLEGE OR MORE WERE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE A GAIN OF FIVE POINTS OR MORE IN THEIR ASSESSMENTS (67%) WHEN COMPARED TO YOUTH WHO DID NOT ATTEND ANY COLLEGE (21%).**



**\$1.37 INCREASE**  
in hourly wages



**25% INCREASE**  
in employment

## Alignment with current evidence

Research suggests that interventions directed at self-regulation are effective and have long-term societal impact. Increased self-regulation skills lead to higher income, better financial planning, reduced engagement in risky activities, and decreased healthcare costs (Murray & Rosanbalm, 2017b). Emerging research suggests that the following be adopted as core pillars of a comprehensive approach to self-regulation focused programs and services (Murray & Rosanbalm, 2017b):

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS	HOW THE CONNECTIONS PROJECT ALIGNS
<p>Targeted Self-Regulation Focus. Intentional integration of cognitive and emotional regulation skills taught through coaching, reinforcement, and support.</p>	<p>Adapted Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) Skills delivered via one-on-one coaching with trained workers, co-facilitated (Coach and peer-led) skills classes, and access to crisis assistance 24/7.</p>
<p>Greater focus on Emotional Regulation. Due to the developmental position of adolescents and young adults, ability to manage emotions and impulses is particularly important.</p>	<p>DBT topics include emotional regulation and mindfulness, project used the Emotion Regulation Checklist for Adolescents (ERCA) to measure gains in emotional regulation.</p>
<p>Caregivers that serve as coaches. Parents, teachers, foster parents, relatives, and social workers should be trained in self-regulation topics and able to assist with skill acquisition. Murray and Rosanbalm (2017) note that this “goes beyond simply serving as a role model.”</p>	<p>The Connections Project developed the C.A.V.E. (Compassion, Awareness, Validation, Empowerment) approach to increase connection among participants and staff prior to and during their enrollment in the program. We have trained over 250 youth services workers across the nation in the C.A.V.E. approach and continue to refine the training as new information becomes available to the field.</p>

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Along with basic needs stability and responsive relationships, self-regulation is essential to living well. Self-regulation skills are shaped throughout the lifespan, and a particular window of opportunity is present during adolescence and young adulthood. Youth with experience in the foster care system, and others who have experienced trauma, have a particular need to develop positive self-regulation skills. Youth programming must focus on this developmental period so youth can increase skills to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, especially when critical early childhood brain development periods have been fraught with neglect, abuse, or insecurity.

Investing in “soft skills” will pay large social and economic dividends in the long term. Failure to do so increases societal risks and costs in numerous domains. With careful planning and organizational capacity, youth-serving programs can positively impact the development of self-regulation skills in transition age youth thereby supporting social connectedness and economic stability. Young adults, regardless of background, deserve the chance to meet their fullest potential and realize their abilities and talents. The YMCA Connections Project, together with ACF and the County of San Diego Health & Human Services, demonstrated that programs using targeted emotion regulation skill building and responsive relationships between worker and youth can lead to positive youth outcomes and fruitful learning.

Future and existing programing should align with the evidence base that recommends greater focus on self-regulation skill development to boost outcomes in adulthood. Such interventions and programs should recognize that the external demands on our vulnerable youth are difficult to manage and navigate. Recognition of the gap between what is expected of youth and their current capacity is critical. Interventions should focus on future planning, guidance through big decisions, stress management, and the development of meaningful support networks that can potentially replace expensive programs and services.

Additionally, there should be intentional focus on emotion regulation and integration of self-regulation skills taught through coaching, reinforcement, and support. Caregivers and youth service providers should serve as coaches to increase skill acquisition and connect with participants to boost engagement in services. Workers can serve as co-regulators and responsive relational models creating an environment that supports self-regulation skill practice and further skill development. Policies and programs must respect the biological underpinnings of behavior change and that our brains are impacted by growth-promoting relationships. Any behavior change is a “brain-based one” (Black, 2017), and in

order to truly impact development of these essential skills, we must incorporate programs and policies that meaningfully integrate this evidence.

These factors will influence the most disconnected youth's abilities to experience safety, a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, self-sufficiency, and success in the worlds of work and social interaction. Our future adults deserve the opportunity to build a foundation upon which they can successfully function in complex environments. The Connections Project is just one concept that should be built upon, further tested, and refined. Additional interventions that serve this purpose are needed across the field so that public systems and community service organizations can seamlessly integrate these concepts to best serve their specific populations. We can no longer focus solely on "hard skills" or leave social-emotional wellness to clinicians alone. This is a problem that needs widespread investment, and the evidence exists to help push our work in the right direction. Our policies, organizations, systems, and processes must utilize the available evidence to refine their conditions, programs, and services to make a lasting impact on a youth population filled with potential.

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