

Leveraging Relational Metaphors: An Analysis of Non-Parental Adult Roles in Response to Youth Needs

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Abstract

The present study takes a strength-based approach to understand how young people's individual needs shape their relationships with significant non-parental adults across adolescence. The analyses drew from qualitative interviews with 27 youth across five time-points (3 years). Three types of youth needs were identified and labeled using metaphors that refer to other prominent relationships in youth lives: coach-like adults were providing help toward a specific achievement or skill development, friend-like adults were providing positive youth-focused companionship, and parent-like adults were nurturing a budding sense of self amid a plethora of life challenges. Each of these sets of youth needs was further examined through thematic analysis and case studies. Implications for future research and models of effective youth mentorship are discussed.

Keywords

role models/mentors, extracurricular activity, qualitative methods

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Non-parental youth–adult relationships are key developmental assets for promoting positive development in adolescence (Theokas & Lerner, 2006). Youth–adult relationships have been associated with developmental benefits in areas such as mental health (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010), academic achievement (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000), and identity formation (Hurd, Sánchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012). Many researchers have committed to building knowledge about how to foster these relationships, whether through intentional youth mentoring programs (e.g., Deutsch & Spencer, 2009) or as relationships that form naturally throughout the course of young people’s lives, which is sometimes referred to as “natural mentoring” (e.g., Hurd, Tan, & Loeb, 2016). To inform efforts to facilitate beneficial youth–adult relationships, more research is needed on the different ways in which youth form these significant relationships with non-parental adults and how these relationships serve as developmental assets for different youth. To that end, the present study is an analysis of how youth describe their needs met in relationships with significant non-parental adults. We used person-centered and relationship-centered qualitative methods to understand (a) how individual needs shape the relationships youth form with significant adults across adolescence and (b) the different supportive roles significant adults play in youth lives.

Building Relationships With Significant Non-Parental Adults

Spencer (2012) posits a model of youth mentoring in which there are three contributors to the formation of youth–adult relationships: mentor factors, youth factors, and contextual factors. With regard to mentor and contextual factors, some researchers have begun to assess them descriptively, looking at the context or social role through which the youth and adult connect: for example, meeting through an organized activity, and characteristics such as type of activity, intensity, or duration (Gardner, Browning, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012; Viau & Poulin, 2015). Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, and Farruggia (2010) originally identified 17 different categories of the context or social role connecting youth and adults but dichotomized their data into kin or non-kin connections, limiting access to nuance.

Outside of social role, interpersonal youth-mentor factors such as shared interests, shared characteristics, and cross-context contact have been found to be related to the formation of significant youth–adult relationships (Futch Ehrlich, Deutsch, Fox, Johnson, & Varga, 2016). Some studies measure closeness within youth–adult relationships but do not differentiate among the

ways in which youth and adults can build and experience closeness (e.g., Hurd & Zimmerman, 2014). Jones and Deutsch (2011) identified the ways in which youth program staff formed relationships with youth through minimizing relational distance, including youth in activities, and connecting to other significant relationships in youth's lives. Youth trust in adults has been identified as a pivotal emotional process in building significant youth–adult relationships. Youth gut feelings, prior knowledge of the adult, and individual tendency to trust others can propel a pathway of trust, and trust can grow as youth experience adult reliability, enduring ups and downs, and specific precipitating events (Griffith, 2016). When youth trust adults within the context of youth programs, they are better able to access the assets of the adult leaders (e.g., the adults' abilities, resources, and capacity for caring; Griffith & Larson, 2016). Trust also increases youth likelihood of using the adult leaders as personal mentors and as a model for well-functioning interpersonal relationships (Griffith & Larson, 2016).

Despite increasing interest in the context and development of youth–adult relationships, how youth factors shape the formation and maintenance of these relationships remains unclear. Youth factors may include personality characteristics (e.g., trusting demeanor; Griffith, 2016), skills youth have for forming relationships (e.g., asking questions or requesting help; Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016), and the particular needs youth bring to these relationships.

Youth Needs Within Significant Youth–Adult Relationships

One way of thinking about what youth *need* from youth–adult relationships is to start with what youth *get* from these relationships. Significant youth–adult relationships can bring multiple developmental benefits. Natural mentors have been found to help with building coping ability and a sense of purpose (Hurd, Stoddard, Bauermeister, & Zimmerman, 2014). Youth access to and connection with adults with educational and vocational capital can strengthen youth future expectations and career search self-efficacy (Chang et al., 2010; Chen & Solberg, 2018). Youth–adult relationships formed within an empowerment or social justice framework can strengthen youth voice, youth use of their own power, and youth engagement in collective action (Liang, Spencer, West, & Rappaport, 2013).

Youth can also receive different forms of social support from their relationships with significant adults. For example, Yu & Deutsch (2019) found that validation and instrumental support may be more aligned with developmental

needs in early adolescence, such as promoting self-esteem and challenging negative stereotypes. Older adolescents, on the contrary, emphasized mutuality with regard to social support and appreciated support related to their identity and cognitive development (Yu & Deutsch, 2019).

Much of the literature on youth development takes a deficit-based approach to identifying youth needs, associating “needs” with “risks.” For example, one study addressed youth in homes with parental domestic violence to find that intensive participation in youth programs can mitigate risk of internalizing problems (Gardner et al., 2012). Neighborhood context has been used to define groups of youth as at risk for delinquency, with studies focusing on adult prosocial investment and adult supervision of youth as mitigating factors (Leech, 2016). Research with “reconnected youth,” who leave high school before graduating and then return to school for a high school diploma or the equivalent, has identified that parent and teacher support can promote youth engagement, mediated by youth academic self-efficacy (Pan, Zaff, & Donlan, 2017). These findings with reconnected youth make room for youth agency by showing the interplay between adult support and young people’s own psychology. However, as a body of literature, these studies pathologize youth, create imposed categories of youth need, and narrow the goals of youth development from holistic thriving to meeting specific societal expectations.

The Present Study

Rather than imposing assumed categories of youth need through risk-based frameworks, this study seeks young people’s own perspectives on how relationships with significant non-parental adults address their needs. Using youth voice to identify specific sets of needs that youth have is the next step in a research agenda to determine which adults are best available to meet youth needs and how to do so. Therefore, the present study takes a strength-based approach to understand how youth articulate the individual needs met by relationships with natural mentors across adolescence. We listened to youth perspectives on their relationships with significant adults over 3 years to assess what needs were met through the relationship by categorizing the various roles natural mentors filled in youth lives. The analytic process utilized direct reflections from young people to triangulate findings across five waves of interviews. We drew on the strengths of systematic qualitative research for identifying factors in narratives that indicate active, formative processes that propel human development (Maxwell, 2012).

Method

The present study addresses the questions: (1) “How do youth individual needs shape relationships with significant adults across adolescence?” and (2) “What are the different supportive roles that significant adults play in youth lives?” This investigation was nested within the larger Youth–Adult Relationship study (see Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016), a longitudinal mixed-methods study examining the development, characteristics, and influence of non-parental youth–adult relationships across multiple contexts over key transition points in middle and late adolescence.

Data Collection

The Youth–Adult Relationship Study consisted of two phases: Phase 1, the screening survey, and Phase 2, the longitudinal portion of the study. The screening survey was completed by 289 youth between the ages of 11 and 17 ($M = 14$) years, recruited from schools, after-school programs, and community-based sites located in a small urban community in the Southeastern United States. A subsample of 41 youth were purposely selected from the screening survey sample to participate in the longitudinal Phase 2 of the study (see Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016 for details). The 41 youth participants (20 middle schoolers and 21 high schoolers) at the beginning of Phase 2 were surveyed and interviewed up to 5 times over 3 years to further explore their relationships with significant non-parental adults.

Interview protocol and procedures. The majority of the interviews were one-on-one but were occasionally done in interviewer pairs to ensure that a same-gender interviewer was present and to enhance interviewer–interviewee rapport through having youth interviewed by one of the same people across time points if possible. The team conducting the youth interviews included the two principal investigators, three graduate students, and two full-time research assistants. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The interviewers identified themselves as White (four out of six) or Asian/Pacific Islander (two out of six). Five out of six interviewers were women.

In each semi-structured interview, youth were asked to nominate a non-parental adult in their lives who was a Very Important Person (VIP), defined as “persons you count on and that are there for you, believe in and care deeply about you, inspire you to do your best, and influence what you do and the choices you make” (adapted from Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011). Youth could nominate any non-parental adult they felt matched the description, including formally paired mentors. However, across the study, no formally

paired mentors were nominated. Approximately one third of the interview questions addressed the relationship with the VIP, who could remain the same or change across the interviews. Participants were also asked questions about their identity, their sense of purpose, and life goals. The majority of the Time 5 (T5) interview protocol was directed to elicit participant reflections on their prior VIP relationships.

Sample. The present study focused on a key question included in the T5 youth interviews (described below), which were conducted with 31 of the original 41 participants. Youth who did not participate at T5 were therefore excluded from the current study sample, and all youth in the current sample participated in all five interviews. Four youth were further excluded from the final analyses: one lacked longitudinal data (only participated in first and last interview), one did not name any VIPs, and two did name VIPs but there were methodological concerns about whether they felt inclined during the interview to name someone even without a significant connection with that person. Specific VIP relationships were included in the analyses if there was a corresponding T5 youth needs excerpt. We analyzed a total of 61 VIP relationships across 27 youth, ranging from 1 to 3 VIP relationships per youth ($M = 2.3$). Table 1 displays youth demographic characteristics, as reported on the screening survey. Youth selected their own pseudonyms during the first interview. Pseudonyms are also used to refer to adult VIPs.

Data Analysis

All interview data in the overarching study were initially indexed by the larger research team using a single set of organizational codes. Transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose, read line-by-line by researchers, and discussed at team meetings to identify recurrent themes appearing in multiple transcripts and related to the overall study's research questions. The initial coding protocol included both descriptive and interpretive codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), such as adult's role; context of the relationship; closeness, conflict, and types of interactions; influences and outcomes; and story of the relationship. The "story of the relationship" code was an emergent code used to map the relationship over time, specifically capturing, "How do youth develop and sustain relationships with non-parental adults across early, mid, and late adolescence?"

Relational development profiles. To focus on each relationship as the unit of analysis, the authors created relationship profiles that organized youth comments about each VIP relationship across all interviews in which youth

Table 1. Screening Survey Demographics and Categorization of T5 Youth Needs VIP Excerpts.

Youth	Gender	Race	Age	Youth needs	VIPs
John	Male	White	13	Coach	Family friend Math teacher
Carrie	Female	White	14	Coach	Youth group leader Science teacher
Philishaqueesha	Male	No answer	14	Coach	Soccer coach M. Soccer coach P.
Scooter	Male	White	14	Coach	Youth group leader School advisor Grandfather
Johnny	Male	White	15	Coach	Cross country coach Physics teacher Boss
Riley	Female	White/ Hispanic	15	Coach	Soccer coach Photographer
Bob	Male	White	16	Coach	Spanish teacher Football coach
Poncho	Female	White	16	Coach	Soccer coach Cross country coach English teacher
Connor	Male	White	17	Coach	Math teacher
Time	Female	White	13	Friend	Aunt Cousin Friend's parent
Abby	Female	White	14	Friend	Advisory teacher Sister
Alicia	Female	White	17	Friend	Grandmother Youth group leader Aunt
Bartholomew	Male	White	17	Friend	Cross-country coach D. Cross-country coach E.
Cecilia	Female	White	17	Friend	Family friend R. Family friend M. Family friend J.
Lizzie	Female	White	13	Parent	Grandmother English teacher
Swagballer	Female	Hispanic	13	Parent	School counselor Pastor's wife
Drew	Male	White	13	Parent	Grandfather G. Grandfather K. Football coach
Lucy	Female	White	14	Parent	Friend's parent M. Friend's parent A.
Bodos	Male	African American	15	Parent	English/drama teacher

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Youth	Gender	Race	Age	Youth needs	VIPs
Rachel	Female	White/ Hispanic	17	Parent	Neighbor Band director
Michael	Male	White	13	Mixed	Teacher (C) Grandmother (F)
Robert	Male	White	13	Mixed	Religion teacher (C) Soccer coach (C) Brother (uncategorized)
Missy	Female	White	14	Mixed	Aunt (uncategorized) Swim coach (C)
Nothing	Female	White	14	Mixed	Grandmother (P) Lacrosse coach (F)
Katherine	Female	Hispanic	15	Mixed	Family friend (F) Volleyball coach P. (C) Volleyball coach L. (C)
McMolnakerson	Male	White	16	Mixed	Auto tech teacher (C) Boss/family friend (F)
Reagan	Female	White	17	Mixed	Aunt (P) Band director (C)

Note. VIP = Very Important Person.

discussed that VIP. Data for each VIP relationship were exported from the Dedoose database to one Microsoft Word document and color-coded by time point (T1, T2, T3, T4, or T5). Next, youth comments were organized according to whether they referred to the initiation, maintenance, impact, or ending of the relationship. A coding guide, developed by the first author with contributions from the research team, provided subheadings labeling different youth, adult, and contextual contributions to the relationship. Each relational development profile included a narrative summary of the relationship trajectory and a short memo on patterns observed.

Youth needs preliminary categorization. The process of creating the relational development profiles led to the identification of three sets of patterns regarding how youth needs were met within these VIP relationships. Using the relationship development profiles, the first author created a preliminary grouping of relationship types based on youth needs. We used metaphors that evoked models provided by other relationships in youth lives: with coaches, with friends, and with parents. The metaphorical label for a relationship did not necessarily match the literal formal role of the adult in the child’s life: for example, a soccer coach may be categorized as a parent, friend, or coach to that youth depending on the youth needs met within that relationship. These categorizations were determined by reading through all

the relational development profiles for each youth to consider both what youth said directly about their own needs and their overall descriptions of the VIP relationships.

Youth needs excerpt categorization. In the T5 interview, while reflecting on each VIP the youth discussed throughout the course of the study, the interviewers asked: “Reflecting back on who you were at the time, what do you think you needed from this relationship?” and “In what ways do you feel those needs were or weren’t met?” Excerpts of youth responses to these questions were exported from Dedoose into Microsoft Word. The first three authors separately read through each T5 youth needs excerpt and labeled them based on the working definitions of the needs categories (coach, friend, parent, and other). After separately categorizing each excerpt, the authors met to compare their decisions and build consensus (Hill et al., 2005). The authors sharpened the category definitions and flagged excerpts on which there was not yet agreement. The first author re-read the flagged excerpts and came to the next meeting with suggestions for how to categorize those excerpts. In addition, each author engaged in an individual process of writing memos about each need category, which facilitated adjustment of the working definitions. The authors reached consensus on the categorization of each excerpt (see Table 1), then conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to define the core relational processes described within each set of youth needs excerpts. An exemplary VIP relationship was selected for each category as a case study, which used the longitudinal relational development profile to further analyze the core relational processes identified.

Trustworthiness

Multiple approaches were used to strengthen the rigor of this study, drawing on the Lincoln and Guba (1985) framework of trustworthiness in interpretive studies and consistent with the American Psychological Association guidelines for assessing methodological integrity in qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2018). Dependability and consistency were established through constant comparison and building consensus (Hill et al., 2005). Coding the youth needs excerpts separately allowed the first three authors opportunities to disagree, discuss, and deepen their shared understanding of each category. We assessed confirmability by comparing results of the youth needs excerpt categorization with the preliminary categorization of the relational development profiles, which found no concerning discrepancies. We assessed credibility with an auditing process conducted by the fourth and fifth authors, who read each youth needs excerpt and assessed their agreement with the categorization,

again finding no concerning discrepancies. Focusing on the youth needs excerpts allowed the team to examine how youth described their own needs within these relationships, contributing authenticity. We bolstered these descriptions through the analysis of the relational development profiles illustrating how these relationships fit into youth lives. For a few youth, the youth needs excerpts had little information, so we drew on what we knew from the rest of that individual's comments about that VIP and found nothing to contradict our initial interpretation of the youth needs excerpt. Finally, a researcher familiar with the project but not actively involved with the data analysis process corroborated the findings, to consider applicability and provide a check for the power of groupthink (Hill et al., 2005). These qualitative analyses thus gained rigor by having multiple people on the research team assessing multiple aspects of the data.

Results

This study identified three distinct categories of youth relationships with significant non-parental adults, each of which served to meet corresponding sets of youth needs. These categories were labeled through metaphorical references to coaches, friends, and parents. Table 1 presents the categorization of each youth–VIP relationship analyzed. Table 1 presents first the youth for whom all their VIP relationships fit the same category (coach, friend, or parent), and then the seven youth whose VIP relationships span different categories. The corresponding sections below similarly present first how many youth had all their VIP relationships in that category and then how many of the mixed-category youth had at least one VIP relationship in that category. After these counts of individual youth, we present the total number of youth–VIP relationships represented (because most youth had multiple VIPs). We describe the findings within each category first through a thematic analysis of the youth needs excerpts, then through a case study of an exemplary youth–adult relationship within that category.

Coaching Youth Toward a Specific Achievement

“Coach” served as a metaphor for relationships where youth described their VIPs as *providing help toward a specific achievement or skill development*. Nine youth had all their VIPs in this category, and six youth had one or two, for a total of 28 VIP relationships across 15 youth. Of the 28 relationships in this category, 10 of the adults were actually coaches, 10 were teachers, seven others interacted with the youth through an activity, and two came into the youth's life through family or friends.

Table 2. How Coach-like Adults Provided Help Toward a Specific Achievement or Skill Development, Based on Youth Reflections on What They Needed in the Relationship.

Providing practical help to support competence (9 excerpts, 7 youth; all male)	Providing encouragement to support morale (7 excerpts, 5 youth; 3 female/2 male)	Providing positive feedback to support confidence (5 excerpts, 3 youth; 2 female/1 male)
"The time that we put in together really has been the most helpful thing so far in college, just having a good calculus base."— <i>Connor, teacher</i>	"I just kind of needed someone encouraging and lighthearted, keeping my spirits up, and he did that."— <i>Bob, teacher</i>	"It's good to have something that's like just sort of solid and then something you know you're good at because somebody helps you get good at it. They sorta tell you that you have potential in it."— <i>Poncho, cross country coach</i>
"How to work on cars, some patience."— <i>McMolnakerson, auto tech teacher</i>	"He helped us all calm down about school."— <i>Reagan, band director</i>	"I definitely saw my soccer, like my skills improve . . . And then even just in school and stuff, I was more confident in myself through soccer."— <i>Riley, soccer coach</i>
"How to cope with the workload through middle school . . . It was hard for me to keep up with everything like that, but she gave me a lot of ideas on how to organize everything, and do a portion here, a portion there."— <i>Robert, religion teacher</i>	"I needed somebody to help me become sure of what I wanted . . . she helped me become decisive, and then that kind of brought everything together for me." <i>Riley, photographer</i>	"She always made me feel like wanted or like she appreciated me being at church and voicing my opinions and my thoughts, which I guess my self-confidence was raised."— <i>Scooter, youth group leader</i>

Thematic analysis of coach-like VIPs. Coaches helped youth toward specific achievements in three ways: (a) through *providing practical help to support competence*, (b) *providing encouragement to support morale*, and (c) *providing positive feedback to support confidence*. See Table 2 for examples. Youth cite their coach-like VIPs as people who helped them excel at challenges in school, sports, spirituality, or another key domain of adolescent competence development. Excerpts coded under *practical help* focused on what the youth learned or achieved in the relationship. Excerpts coded under *providing encouragement* focused on the emotional context that the VIP relationship created for the youth to pursue achievement. Excerpts coded under *positive feedback* focused on how youth received validation from VIPs in ways that affirmed their sense of competence and strengthened their self-confidence.

When youth described their relationships with coach-like VIPs, they mentioned having strong specific needs in the domain of life in which the coach-like VIP was providing support. For example, while reflecting on his relationship with his Spanish teacher, Bob stated, "It was just nice to know. . . on this very technical and specific level that he really cared about my achievement in that study [of Spanish], specifically." Some youth also referred to having low levels of general need in other domains of life. For example, Connor said, "I didn't really have that many problems going on, usually I go to my parents and stuff like that before anything else." Because Connor had access to strong support from his parents, his relationship with his math teacher could focus on one specific area of need without leaving other needs unmet.

Youth mentioned noticing a certain warmth or personal quality in the way the VIP related to them. Youth reported that VIPs created a warm and supportive environment in which to pursue achievement. Poncho said her soccer coach was "always very concerned if I had an issue," and Bob said his connection with his Spanish teacher "felt very personal, instead of just like a regular teacher." John noticed his math teacher was "taking extra time before and after school to discuss things," referring to extra help with the specific content of the class. For Reagan, it was the band director who "would stop in the middle of class and just talk to us about life" in general. Three youth needs excerpts in this category included the term "mentor" and two mentioned that their coach-like VIPs were also role models for them. These aspects of the youth needs excerpts provide evidence that, while the main contributions of coach-like VIPs were their support for achievement, their personal and relational qualities were also part of how they became meaningful as a significant adults in youth lives.

Case study of Johnny and Col Holtz at military school. Johnny nominated Col Holtz, his physics teacher at a military boarding school, as a significant adult during his T2 interview (age 16, Grade 11). This relationship was exemplary within the "coach" category because of the multiple ways in which Johnny described Col Holtz's significance through *providing help toward a specific achievement or skill development*. All of Johnny's VIP relationships were categorized as coach-like relationships: one was his ninth-grade cross-country coach, and the other three were within the context of a job. Overall, Johnny appreciated his positive attachments to adults without wanting or expecting them to be part of his life outside of the specific context in which he was connected to them.

Johnny described Col Holtz as a "really good teacher" who "helped us outside of that [class] too, with SAT prep" (T2) and "tutored me and my

friend for the AP [physics] exam” (T5). Col Holtz was therefore *providing practical help to support competence* in academic achievement and college readiness. Johnny was also drawn to Col Holtz “because he went to the Naval Academy” and “I’m trying to go there” (T2). When the time came, “he wrote me a crazy good recommendation letter for [college] and for the Naval Academy” (T4). This letter of recommendation was an act of practical support to supplement Johnny’s competence in the college application process, and validated Col Holtz’s belief in Johnny’s potential for success.

Johnny described ways in which Col Holtz was *providing encouragement to support morale*. Johnny remarked that “he’s really encouraging” and “he’s pretty understanding when you do something stupid,” in that “he’s strict but he’s not mean about it” (T2). Johnny also appreciated that “if you’re doing good he’ll make sure to tell you that you’re doing good” (T2), which is part of *providing positive feedback to support confidence*. When Johnny first nominated Col Holtz, he described how during study hall “when he’s on duty he’ll come and talk to me” (T2). In his last interview, Johnny reflected, “he would always look out for me, keep an eye out for me” (T5), indicating a sense of specificity in their personal connection. Johnny’s relationship with Col Holtz provides an exemplary case of a young person appreciating the ways in which a warm, positive, caring adult provided help toward a specific achievement without the youth expecting the relationship to expand beyond the bounds of their initial context.

Befriending Youth to Offer Positive Companionship

“Friend” served as a metaphor for relationships in which VIPs met youth needs by *providing positive youth-focused companionship*, and youth had opportunities to practice giving and receiving different benefits of friendship. Five youth had all of their VIPs in this category, and four youth had one of their VIPs in this category, for a total of 17 VIP relationships across nine youth. Of these 17 VIP relationships, six of the adults were family members, six of the adults were family friends, and the remaining five adults knew youth through after-school activities such as sports or youth group. Five youth used the word “friend” to refer to their friend-like VIPs.

Thematic analysis of friend-like VIPs. Friend-like VIPs shaped the youth-focused companionship that characterized these relationships by providing three things: (a) *a reliable presence*, (b) *a new perspective*, and (c) *acceptance free from pressure to impress*. See Table 3 for examples. Excerpts coded under *providing a reliable presence* focused on how the VIP offered youth a stable, reliable, and/or consistent relationship, throughout daily life and in more

Table 3. How Friend-like Adults Provided Positive, Reliable Youth-Focused Companionship, Based on Youth Reflections on What They Needed in the Relationship.

Providing a reliable presence (7 excerpts, 5 youth; 4 female/1 male)	Providing a new perspective (6 excerpts, 4 youth; 3 female/1 male)	Providing acceptance free from pressure to impress (5 excerpts, 4 youth; 3 female/1 male)
“She’s been here through literally everything.”— <i>Bartholomew, cross country coach E.</i>	“Just talk through it all and kinda show me that it’s not as bad as it seems and I don’t know, she just has a really good perspective on life I think.”— <i>Cecilia, family friend M.</i>	“Just someone I could be myself around. I don’t have to try to impress them all the time.”— <i>Katherine, family friend</i>
“Just like knowing that I have another friend there.”— <i>Alicia, youth group leader</i>	“I mean he’s very worldly; he’s been all over, he has a very—I think I needed that well thought out mindset to base some of my own judgments on and things like that.”— <i>Time, friend’s parent</i>	“It was nice to being able to talk to someone about anything and just not caring because she didn’t care.”— <i>McMolnakerson, boss</i>
“I mean, I can always—yeah, tell her random stuff”— <i>Abby, sister</i>	“It’s really just someone to spend time with other than parents or friends.”— <i>Michael, Grandmother</i>	“She understood that we had tons of homework and problems and she didn’t try to force us and put a ton of pressure on us or anything.”— <i>Nothing, lacrosse coach</i>

challenging moments. Excerpts coded under *providing a new perspective* reported that friend VIPs offered a different way of thinking about their lives and the world than youth would otherwise have access to. Excerpts coded under *providing acceptance free from pressure to impress* explained that VIPs offered a space in which youth could be themselves, feel comfortable, and say what was on their mind.

When asked what they needed from these relationships, some youth first responded with “nothing” (Alicia, grandmother), often followed by reference to the VIP being “there to talk if I wanted to” (Alicia, youth group leader). For some youth, the friend-like VIP provided an opportunity for interpersonal engagement that was not readily available to them in their social context.

Bartholomew explained that he needed his cross-country coach, Ms. Edwards, to be “someone [to] just welcome me into high school like she did: I was that White skinny kid with no friends.” Youth who struggled to connect with same-age friends found adult VIPs who could provide that company in a positive and developmentally supportive way. Each relationship as reported by the youth was structured as a youth-focused relationship, distinct from peer friendships that have an expectation of equivalent need and shared power from both participants.

Case study of Cecilia and Molly in the transition to college. Cecilia nominated Molly, “one of my mom’s best friends” (T4), as her significant adult during her T2, T3, T4, and T5 interviews (age 17, Grade 12 at T2). Cecilia had “known [Molly] for like as long as I can remember” (T2) and spent a summer in high school working for Molly. This relationship was exemplary within the “friend” category because of the multiple ways in which Cecilia described Molly’s significance through *providing positive, youth-focused companionship*. Cecilia used the word “friend” to refer to Molly several times, recognizing that “it’s not that common for people to be good friends with their parents’ friends” (T2) but “with Molly it’s just a direct friendship” (T3), and “she’s a good friend” (T4). Cecilia’s three VIPs, all women who were close with her family, were all categorized as friend-like relationships. Cecilia was able to form her own unique relationship with each of these three important adults and drew strength from each of them throughout high school and her transition to college.

Cecilia described the ways in which Molly *provided a reliable presence*. As Cecilia matured, Molly would “come over to our house a bunch of times to watch *Downton Abbey*” or “[go] on walks with my mom around the neighborhood and I go with them sometimes when I’m home,” which Cecilia provided as two examples of “just kind of hanging out” (T5). Cecilia counted on Molly’s reliable presence during the transition to college, when Cecilia struggled with the inconsistency of her high school friends and found it difficult to befriend college peers.

Cecilia preferred Molly’s advice to other people’s because “for some reason the way she said it just. . . not made it more helpful, but I could kind of see where it was going” (T4) and the advice “put it all in perspective” (T5). Molly’s advice during their personal conversations *provided a new perspective*. Cecilia felt comfortable bringing to Molly issues she needed help with because of the way she felt in this relationship. Cecilia explained, “I’ve grown up with her, she’s seen all the stages of my life so she can be helpful, I guess, since she’s seen all the stuff that’s been going on” (T4), including Cecilia’s struggles during the transition to college. During this time when

Cecilia was disconnected from same-age friends, Molly *provided acceptance free from pressure to impress*. Cecilia's relationship with Molly provides an exemplary case of a youth utilizing a relationship with a reliable, accepting, interesting adult to access positive, youth-focused companionship.

Parent-Like Nurturance for a Young Person's Budding Sense of Self

"Parent" served as the metaphor for relationships in which VIPs met youth needs by *nurturing a budding sense of self amid a plethora of life challenges*. These relationships represented the deepest and most extensive engagement between youth and adults. Six youth had all their VIP relationships in this category, and two youth had one VIP relationship in this category each, for a total of 14 relationships. Of the 14 VIPs in this category, five were actual relatives (grandparents, aunts), five were school-based adults, and four were from other social contexts such as the church or the neighborhood. The metaphor of "parent" came directly from participants, who at times referred to these VIPs as "mother-like" (Lizzie, teacher, T5), a "second mom" (Bodos, teacher, T2), or a "fatherly figure" (Rachel, band director, T2).

Thematic analysis of parent-like VIPs. Parent-like VIPs nurtured youth by providing three things: (a) *guidance with which to grow as a person*, (b) *space in which to feel connected*, and (c) *a foundation from which to feel supported*. See Table 4 for examples. Youth viewed their parent-like VIPs as key players in their own life management across multiple domains, as they navigated challenges with family, school, and friends. Excerpts coded under *providing guidance* explained how advice from VIPs impacted core aspects of how youth viewed themselves and made decisions. Excerpts coded under *feeling connected* referred to opportunities to feel comfortable, build trust, receive validation, and speak openly. Excerpts coded under *providing a foundation* focused on the stable, consistent presence that youth knew they could rely on when other aspects of their lives were painful or in flux.

A common theme among youth with parent-like VIPs was that youth experienced a high level of need for intimate support because of limitations or difficulties in their own relationships with their parents. Three youth (Lizzie, Drew, and Reagan) were dealing with their parents' separation and benefited from close connections with parent-like VIPs throughout that process. Drew said he turned to one of his grandfathers when he was "frustrated with all three of my parents, including my stepmom." Lizzie said her grandmother was "the only stable person in my life" who helped her understand that her parents' separation "isn't all

Table 4. How Parent-like Adults Nurtured a Budding Sense of Self Amid a Plethora of Life Challenges, Based on Youth Reflections on What They Needed in the Relationship.

Providing guidance with which to grow as a person (8 excerpts, 6 youth, 4 female/2 male)	Providing a space in which to feel connected (7 excerpts, 5 youth; 4 female/1 male)	Providing a foundation from which to feel supported (5 excerpts, 3 youth; all female)
<p>“That’s, I think, impacted me a lot, just from when he would talk to me, even as a little kid, about being a good person, and being honest. . . affected how I’ve grown up, and stuff like that.”—<i>Drew, Grandfather G.</i></p>	<p>“I gained support and someone that I could trust with just talking about problems.”—<i>Rachel, neighbor</i></p>	<p>“Like a rock: someone that would always be there, that I wouldn’t have to worry about them.”—<i>Swagballer, school counselor</i></p>
<p>“I guess her advice because my mom does give advice but she always knows what to say and she comes from like her personal experiences so then like she just filters it out to us, and so that’s always like good to have around you.”—<i>Lucy, friend’s parent A.</i></p>	<p>“I guess just someone to talk to who I feel like completely comfortable around and so like I never felt the need to hold anything back.”—<i>Lucy, friend’s parent M.</i></p>	<p>“No matter what you choose, or like no matter what you go through, [she] will be able to help you through these kinds of things. So, she’s always kind of been like a rock for me to stand on.”—<i>Lizzie, Grandmother</i></p>
<p>“Probably just support and good advice I think to deal with some friendships. I definitely had some friendships that weren’t very healthy. . . So he would be like, ‘Okay, this is how this is affecting you.’ And then ‘you [need] to change this.’”—<i>Rachel, band director</i></p>	<p>“Especially talking to me, and stuff, because I’ve gotten frustrated with all three of my parents, including my stepmom, and stuff like that, over the last three years, and situations have changed about 50 times, and stuff like that, and so he’s been a big help, in just talking to me, and stuff like that.”—<i>Drew, Grandfather K.</i></p>	<p>“She was always a support system, like kind of in the background when—if I didn’t—if I wasn’t in a good place with my parents, if I would argue with them or something—she was always there to support me too.”—<i>Reagan, Aunt</i></p>

bad.” Other youth also experienced strain in their relationships with their parents. Rachel said because she and her mom “always fought,” her mom “wasn’t gonna sit down and have real conversations with me,” so she turned to her neighbor. The support provided by parent-like VIPs supplemented actual parental relationships when youth were not able to access all of the parental nurturance they needed. However, none of the participants implied that accessing a supplemental form of support in any way threatened or undermined what they did have with their parents.

When a VIP from a school-based context became a parent-like VIP, it meant that person was providing support that spanned multiple domains of the young person’s life. Lizzie found it “comforting” that her English teacher made herself available throughout the school day, so Lizzie could “sit for a couple of minutes” anytime she was “having trouble focusing” and needed to “cool down.” Further evidence for parent-like relationships spanning different domains of life came from the full relational profiles, such as how Rachel and her school band director went on hikes together and how Bodos spent time on weekends helping the husband of his English/drama teacher, Ms. Prynne. Parent-like VIPs who connected with youth initially in school contexts became a core part of how youth coped with challenges and propelled themselves forward.

Case study of Swagballer and Stephanie taking on challenges. Swagballer nominated Stephanie, her pastor’s wife, as a significant adult during T2 and T3 (age 14, Grade 9 at T2). They met in church 3½ years before the T2 interview. Swagballer said Stephanie was a “second mom” (T2, T4). This relationship was exemplary within the “parent” category because of how Swagballer described Stephanie’s significance through *nurturing a budding sense of self amid a plethora of life challenges*. Both of Swagballer’s VIP relationships were categorized as parent-like relationships. When asked to compare these two VIPs, Swagballer explained, “Ms. Harris knows stuff about me, but Steph actually knows me” (T3). Stephanie supported Swagballer as she faced life in high school, her parents’ divorce, and tension in her relationship with her mother.

Swagballer reflected that Stephanie’s advice was “always right even if I didn’t listen” (T3), which corresponded to Swagballer’s sense of herself as needing “someone to guide me on the right path” (T5) to “learn what’s right from wrong” (T5). Swagballer appreciated the way Stephanie was *providing guidance with which to grow as a person*. Within the time they spent together, Stephanie was also *providing a space in which to feel connected*. Swagballer found that Stephanie “listens to me and cares about me and stuff” (T3) and “I can talk to her about anything—I don’t know, she just kind of had that mom

vibe” (T4). To sustain the relationship, Swagballer and Stephanie “just hung out, like all the time, whenever I needed someone she would be there for me” (T5). Stephanie accepted Swagballer “for who I am” (T4) which felt “comforting, peaceful” (T3) and meant “I trust her more than anyone” (T3).

Stephanie was “always there” (T3) as Swagballer struggled with family, friends, and school, thus *providing a foundation from which to feel supported*. Swagballer reported that Stephanie was “the first person I went to” (T3) when in need, and “I can call her in the middle of the night and she’ll answer the phone” (T4). When Swagballer “got in trouble” and was kicked out of her mother’s house (T5), she found refuge in Stephanie’s home and “stayed with her for a little bit” (T5). By T5, Swagballer had returned to living with her mom and actually wanted to name her mom as a VIP, indicating a positive turn in their relationship. Swagballer’s level of personal need, and the ways in which Stephanie rose to the challenge of addressing those needs, combined to make their relationship particularly close and powerful. Swagballer’s relationship with Stephanie provides an exemplary case of a young person becoming close with a present, connected, supportive adult who nurtured the youth’s budding sense of self amid a plethora of life challenges to supplement support received from parents.

Discussion

We implemented a youth-focused developmental approach to examine what youth need and what youth get in their relationships with significant non-parental adults. We analyzed youth reflections on relationships with significant non-parental adults from five waves of interviews across 3 years and identified three distinct, yet overlapping, sets of roles adults fill to meet youth needs in these relationships. To label these three sets of roles, we used metaphors that refer to models provided by other relationships in youth lives: with coaches, with friends, and with parents. We described the patterns found within each set of youth needs through thematic analysis and an exemplary case study. Some themes manifest across these sets of roles in different ways, such as adults providing youth with validation and adults supporting youth in skill development. Below is a discussion of the distinctions among the ways in which significant adults fill the metaphorical roles of coaches, friends, and parents in youth lives.

Three Forms of Youth–Adult Connection

Coach-like VIPs provided help toward a specific achievement or skill development by providing practical help to support competence, encouragement to

support morale, and positive feedback to support confidence. Youth spoke very positively about these VIPs and felt they were good people who also liked them in return. These relationships were focused on the specific ways in which the adult was helping the youth, and the youth participants did not mention wanting or expecting other forms of closeness or support. These findings illustrate that mentors do not need to be saviors—mentors can focus on skill building and scaffolding youth achievement and need not be more than that to make meaningful contributions to youth lives (Albright, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017). Some researchers studying formal mentoring have challenged the idea that a close, intimate relationship is a necessary ingredient for effectiveness in *all* youth mentoring relationships (McQuillin, Strait, Smith, & Ingram, 2015). Our findings support the idea that some youth may need and want this more focused instrumental support.

In describing coach-like VIPs, only male youth mentioned practical help in gaining knowledge or learning how to do something. Given these findings align with gender stereotypes (Liang, Bogat, & Duffy, 2013), many layers of gender norms may be at play. It may be boys do receive more practical help or practical help is more salient to them, or when interviewed, they are more comfortable speaking in terms of practicality. However, such gendered-relational patterns have not held in studies with youth of color, and research with multiracial samples has highlighted boys' desire for emotional closeness in resistance to stereotypes (Liang, Bogat et al., 2013; Way, 2011). Further work is needed to ensure accessibility of practical support for all youth (Liang, Bogat et al., 2013).

Friend-like VIPs offered youth-focused companionship by providing a reliable presence, a new perspective, and acceptance free from pressure to impress. Many youth in this category struggled with their same-age peers and were grateful for a social connection in which they could relate closely with someone and find a sense of themselves as social people. Future research can address whether and how these friend-like VIP relationships provide opportunities for youth to build social skills that help them with same-age peer friendships or provide a bridge until youth regain access to supportive same-age peer friendships. These findings can be understood in relation to research on age-appropriate forms of mutual sharing between youth and adults (Lester, Goodloe, Johnson, & Deutsch, 2019) and how adults can establish and navigate personal boundaries as they build intimate connections with young people (Rhodes, Liang, & Spencer, 2009). These findings also reflect previous research on youth relationships with staff in after-school programs, where many youth reference the “peer-like” qualities of adult staff. Importantly, youth are able to distinguish staff relationships from true peer relationships, noting that the staff are still adults but able to serve in a liminal space,

providing some of the benefits of being simultaneously adult and peer-like (Hirsch, 2005).

Parent-like VIPs were nurturing a budding sense of self amid a plethora of life challenges by providing guidance with which to grow as a person, a space in which to feel connected, and a foundation from which to feel supported. Youth in this category needed a high level of support to supplement support from their parents, which in many cases was reduced due to challenges in their parents' lives (e.g., separation/divorce) or difficulties in their own relationships with one or both parents. Parent-like VIPs made themselves physically and emotionally available in multiple ways, giving a lot of their time and energy to their relationships with youth. Further research is needed to understand the perspective of adults in these parent-like roles and how these adults interact with a young person's actual parents. It would be important to distinguish in this line of research between a non-parental adult playing a supplementary parenting role versus actually needing to become a surrogate parent. In one case, the primary parenting relationship remains intact; in the other, the primary parenting relationship may be characterized by abuse, neglect, absence, death, or other fundamental threats to the parents' ability to be the primary caregiver. Within this study, none of the youth participants reported parent-like VIPs who permanently took on the role of primary caregiver. Even Swagballer, although she benefited from being able to live with Stephanie during a time of conflict with her own mother, later returned to living with her mother at home.

These findings provide a framework with which to consider how a mentoring relationship fits with needs present in the life of an individual youth, which contributes to the existing literature on the importance of adult attunement to youth needs (e.g., Pryce, 2012; Varga & Deutsch, 2016). Previous research has considered age or gender as individual characteristics through which to analyze how youth describe receiving different forms of social support from significant adults (Johnson, Marks, Deutsch, & Arbeit, 2017; Yu & Deutsch, 2019). The literature on person–environment fit suggests that individuals receive optimal developmental benefit from settings that fit their individual needs (Eccles et al., 1993). We approached relationships as such settings, and we suggest that how relationships fit with youth needs is important to consider.

Paying attention to the specific developmental fit between the individual young person and the relationship with a significant adult also contributes to conversations regarding optimal methods for designing youth mentoring programs. For example, some researchers assert that the primary purpose of a youth mentoring relationship is to provide intimacy based on mutuality and trust (Rhodes, 2002). Other researchers argue that mentors need to provide

strategic skill building opportunities through which youth can pursue their goals (Napolitano et al., 2014). One of the strengths of studying natural mentoring (i.e., asking participants to nominate who they see as a significant adult in their lives) is that it enables assessment of the ways in which young people already relate to adults around them, which can inform how mentoring programs can be aware of and even responsive to a diversity of youth needs.

Limitations and Next Steps

A key strength of this study is the use of five waves of data from youth interviews about the significant adults in their lives. This study design allowed for longitudinal triangulated assessment of how youth make meaning of their relationships while they are in progress, through the creation and analysis of relationship profiles in combination with a thematic analysis of youth's explicit reflections on their needs met within these relationships. Although this study contributed to the literature by centering youth needs, further studies can deepen our understanding of these three types of significant youth–adult relationships by using different lenses. For example, further research from the youth perspective can assess different ways in which youth develop relational skills within these three types of relationships, as in what they learn that shapes their social/emotional development and engagement in future relationships. Related lines of research can seek to understand these relationships from adult perspectives, to see how non-parental adults view the ways in which they meet youth needs. Research with adults should also consider how adults establish and navigate appropriate boundaries with youth, particularly within friend-like and parent-like relationships.

Qualitative research allows us to identify new categories, describe characteristics of these categories, and delineate processes that differentiate these categories. However, this qualitative study was confined by a limited sample size drawn from a population of mostly White middle-class youth in the Southeastern United States. Further research is needed across different populations and data collection methods. Research using both qualitative and quantitative methods should also assess how marginalized and underrepresented youth, such as youth of color and queer youth, can and do get their needs met in relationships with significant non-parental adults. Future research should also investigate whether youth with various marginalized identities have different needs met and metaphorical roles filled by VIPs.

Conclusion

We presented three distinct sets of needs that can be understood and described through identifiable relational processes. The categories of coach, friend, and

parent were used here as metaphors. VIPs were not seen as filling these exact roles, but rather as meeting a related set of developmental needs. One way to understand how adults can engage in authentic, positive, supportive relationships with young people is through an assessment of fit between the youth needs and the relational processes. Part of having an authentic relationship is authentically responding to the needs presented by the young person within that particular relational context. Understanding these needs and understanding the processes through which adults are meeting these needs can help shape future research on youth–adult relationships and can help inform intentional program design of youth mentoring and other youth development programs.

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