

Rising to the Challenge Part 2: It Starts with Relationships

April 15, 2020

Karen Pittman ([00:01](#)):

So Kent, I know that we started out and I've asked you to do the almost impossible task of taking what would have been a wonderful presentation and cramming it down into six minutes, but let me just jump in. I think your bio is going to be sort of stuck up in the chat space. For folks that don't know Kent, I think you all probably do know him. He is the CEO and president of the Search Institute, has a background in education and in youth development as well and has really been instrumental in sort of bringing to the forefront this idea that it starts with relationships. Obviously that is a now more than ever. Kent, jump right in with us and talk to us about why, as we're talking about relationships, it's so important to understand if we're going to get the full impact of relationships being a driver towards thriving, why we have to have a more sophisticated nuanced understanding of what we mean by developmental relationships.

Kent Pekel ([00:57](#)):

That's fantastic. I think Karen, for almost everybody who is taking their time on a day like this to be on a webinar, the power of relationships is a given. It's something that we've dedicated all of our research to at Search Institute. For those of us who've been thinking about this stuff for a long time, whether you're a researcher or a practitioner, we are living through an unbelievable moment of both crisis and opportunity. As we are literally socially distancing, we are all experiencing both personally and professionally that the power of relationships that is born out in research. I would submit that if we are going to take advantage of this opportunity collectively as a field as you just suggested Karen, we need to do, we need to be mindful not just of the science but of the communication of the science.

Kent Pekel ([01:44](#)):

I want to plant one seed with all of you who are out there today that as you are thinking both about using technology to build relationships in the interim, but especially as you look ahead to reopening of schools and youth programs next fall, which will happen at some point, we need to be attentive not only to the kind of analytic and intellectual work that the Soul Alliance is doing, which is fantastic, but to how we convey it. Very briefly what you see on the screen there are the five elements of a developmental relationship that have emerged from Search Institute's research. We can show empirically that when kids experience relationships are characterized by high levels of those five elements in families, in schools and in out of school time programs, their outcomes are better. Their risk behaviors are lower and they're more on the path to thrive.

Kent Pekel ([02:28](#)):

What we knew going into this research that not only we but many experts are prone to put all of their eggs in the basket of their content and they don't think deeply about the communication of that content. We concurrently discovered a wonderful organization called FrameWorks Institute based in

Washington DC that does think deeply about the communication of this content. We partnered with them on a multi year project of applied research to understand not just how we understand the science of developmental relationships with how we think about the way that especially the public perceives relationships. And we learned some lessons and we developed a tool that I'll just quickly share with you here.

Kent Pekel ([03:12](#)):

One difficult lesson we learned is that when we rush straight into talking about the kind of elements you see there on the screen or frankly the kind of graphs that we just briefly looked at, we lose a lot of people and we don't lose them just because it's wonky stuff that has a lot of words on screens. What FrameWorks Research, which is both quantitative and qualitative, showed us we lose, is that for many in the general public, when you mentioned relationships in kids' lives, their mental model is of the primacy of the family relationship and that if the relationship a kid has got at home is positive and nurturing and caring, they're probably very likely to succeed in life. But that, and critically for us, if the relationship is perceived as dysfunctional or uncaring, that there's not much that a teacher or youth worker or a mentor or somebody can do because the public perceives those relationships as so much less powerful than the relationships in the family.

Kent Pekel ([04:10](#)):

For a bunch of applied researchers like Search Institute, our immediate reaction to that problem is we'll show you more data and we'll give you more analysis. What we learned from FrameWorks Institute is that that actually can backfire and then in fact our well intentioned desire to bring the science to the floor can undermine making the case for relationships. If we flip to the next slide briefly, what FrameWorks helped us think deeply about was the power of metaphor. What you see right there in that picture of a tree with some roots is what we think is a pretty powerful metaphor for the role of relationships in youth development.

Kent Pekel ([04:48](#)):

I got to say before I share this that this metaphor beat out the one that I and other researchers fell in love with and have been using, which is that developmental relationships are like fluoride in toothpaste and particular Junlei Li and Megan Julian did a great article a number of years ago and they took that metaphor and really built it out to be the active ingredient in any youth program or intervention for kids. I ran around the country and put into articles and even wrote an article that was a response to their article called, Finding the Fluoride. When frameworks tested that metaphor, they found it doesn't fly. It doesn't seem organic enough. It seems too productized. Even the cavity fighting properties of fluoride didn't connect.

Kent Pekel ([05:30](#)):

Long story short, what FrameWorks Institute came up with was this very organic metaphor of the roots, the roots of a tree. It could be a plant too, but we're building on the tree and that those roots are the relationships in kids' lives. You have a lot of roots. It's a web. You can have deep roots, maybe those family relationships, but the smaller, shorter roots also mattered dramatically. When those roots are strong, they actually can help the tree, the young person, grow and thrive and withstand the storms that life throws at them.

Kent Pekel ([06:00](#)):

Then finally, the reason we think this metaphor is what FrameWorks would call a generative is that it doesn't stop with the tree. The soil within the roots are growing. If it's full of toxins, it is going to influence the development of that young person, but if it's full of nutrients, it's full of the kind of environments that the Soul Alliance is urging us to create, the roots are stronger and the young person's more likely to thrive. We're trying hard in our work to build on this metaphor. We're even playing with the leaves being the social, emotional and other competencies that kids need to thrive. We're also beginning to think not just about metaphor but story as another way.

Kent Pekel ([06:42](#)):

If I had one big takeaway to urge people as we all try and seize this moment of opportunity to elevate relationships and in the public discourse and frankly public and private investment in relationships. We got to think as creatively about the communications as we are about the content.

Karen Pittman ([06:59](#)):

I love this. I mean, it's perfect because as you said, those roots are showing the relationships. They're so varied in both their directionality, their size, their length. You can think about the tap root as being the root in the family. Those tap roots can get damaged, but if you have enough other roots in the root system, the tree can still stay healthy. It's a wonderful metaphor for the relationships with that soil being the context. Then clearly, the tree is young people thriving with all of the complex elements. I hope we can work with that and that you'll let us work with that altogether as a wonderful way to sort of bring these ideas together and think more robustly about what they all mean.

Karen Pittman ([07:44](#)):

Let me ask Robyn to sort of get herself unmuted and put her video on because it's really interesting that the decision that you made to sort of get FrameWorks involved to say, "We're making all of these just doing this wonderful science translation and making all of these analogies and making all of these graphs and images, but do they really work? How do people who are really in the midst of doing this work see them?"

Karen Pittman ([08:14](#)):

One of the things that the National Urban League did was to decide to do a listening tour of the stakeholders that they work with to find out do these things that have been developed by the Seed Commission and [inaudible 00:08:28] and Whole Child Frameworks and is all of this really helping us. So Robyn, come on screen and tell us a little bit about the listening tour and give us a little bit of a sense if you can zoom in, because I know you have a lot of information but we don't have much time, if you can zoom in on how these things really were responded to when you showed them to parents and families.

Robyn Ince ([08:46](#)):

Okay. Thank you so much. Thank you. And Kent, I appreciate your presentation and really the metaphor of rootedness and relationships. As Karen mentioned, we at the National Urban League conducted a series of listening sessions over the past six months and really worked on elevating the frameworks of sale, seed, sold and whole child equity with an eye toward engaging people in the conversation who are often on the receiving end and not involved in the construction of these concepts and framework. We were able to engage a number of different stakeholder groups from early childhood to K-12 educators, researchers of color, those in the social work, wellness and juvenile justice sector and also afterschool providers and arts educators.

Robyn Ince ([09:39](#)):

What we found in those sessions was that everyone did have particular reactions. The ones I'm going to focus on right now though are our parent sessions. We held two parents sessions. One was in October in New Orleans, the other in New York and in February. And over the course of those two sessions, as parents looked at the variety of frameworks, some of which have already been presented this morning, four questions kept coming up.

Robyn Ince ([10:08](#)):

Who is implementing this framework and were parents included in the creating of it? Where is there an acknowledgement of the historical inequity and the need for cultural context in these frameworks? What's going to happen if an adult doesn't get this right? Where's the accountability? And where do I as a parent, a grandparent or parenting adult fit in the process? It was really good to hear that the Search Institute with their work has really a clear focus on testing out the utility of these messages and tools both for parents and the public and that they're thinking about how to bring this information directly to families.

Robyn Ince ([10:49](#)):

As they do that, we would really want to again, encourage them to think about what we learned from the parent sessions. There are five things I want to focus on. One is that safety of mind, body and spirit is paramount for parents so that the child can learn and thrive. That safety cannot be fully actualized if there are not opportunities. Parents to be able to co-create his or her relationship with that institution and the lack of connections and alignment actually perpetuates an unsafe environment for that child. As such, it is important to remember historical context, seek understanding of that context and co-create meaning with family, with community and most importantly involve parents in the process of creating the social emotional approaches, implementation, examination, reflection and growth of those processes.

Robyn Ince ([11:52](#)):

We believe that the developmental relationships, the elements that were highlighted are absolutely important and spot on. As we think about co-creating meaning an opportunity for parents and families, we encourage everyone to really be intentional about where parents fit in this picture, all parents. We can extend things like developmental frameworks into the parent child relationship. These same steps extend not just to the youth, but to the entire family unit. These elements exist and need to be supported in both realms of that child's experience and that the challenge, opportunity and requests that came from the parent sessions is something that we can all act upon. We really see this as an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the complexities of developmental relationships and what comprises that to share information with those parents and the co-create possibility with an eye toward accountability and getting this right for our children with an eye toward equity.

Karen Pittman ([12:57](#)):

Thanks Robyn. I know that that was just a taste of the exciting work that's around framing, around taking these really critically important ideas and getting them to be stickier. I really want to applaud both Kent and the Search Institute and [inaudible 00:13:17] and Robyn and team at Urban League of going out and finding out if these work and how they work. I know we're about to make a session, a segue into a real break this time but Kent, I want to give you 30 seconds to say, I know that you've been

taking these ideas out to families. How do they respond to this more robust definition of developmental relationships?

Kent Pekel ([13:37](#)):

Well, that's a great question. Family work is a huge part of ours and so absolutely amen to all of the work that we just heard about. We haven't started using the roots metaphor with families. This actually this webinar literally in one we did this morning was the national debut of the roots metaphor. You all were here first and we'll see if it gets any action. We wanted to, we were going to debut it at the forum conference and so now we did it virtually, but I will say that the five elements resonate very strongly with parenting adults. Parenting adults look at them and actually it is a helpful way for them to think about relationships as frankly beyond caring because when we talked to parents and frankly practitioners about relationships, it often starts with and stops with caring. We know that caring is necessary but not sufficient if it's a developmental relationship.

Kent Pekel ([14:26](#)):

The final thing I'll say too that I think Robyn's comments highlight is while we know that all five of these relational elements are critical for development, they happen differently depending on context, depending upon race, depending on culture. The one that we see that's most obvious is the sharing power piece and all share power dramatically differently based on their lived experience and culture. We're also have recently been looking at some data that suggests the last element of expanding possibilities, which takes us from real developmental psychology in relationships kind of into the realm of social capital and networks that help you get ahead. Also, kids experience that very differently along the lines of race, culture, and socioeconomic status. The five elements we think really resonate with parenting adults, it's going to be really interesting to see if the roots of metaphor is useful for them as well.

Karen Pittman ([15:18](#)):

Great. Thank you, Kent. Thank you, Robyn for getting this teed up. We know we can come back and do this a lot more and have deeper conversations. There are things going into the chat about opportunities to learn more about the FrameWorks work. We'll keep you posted as the listening tour information comes out from the National Urban League and we've also got important information coming out from Ed Trust in the same space.